

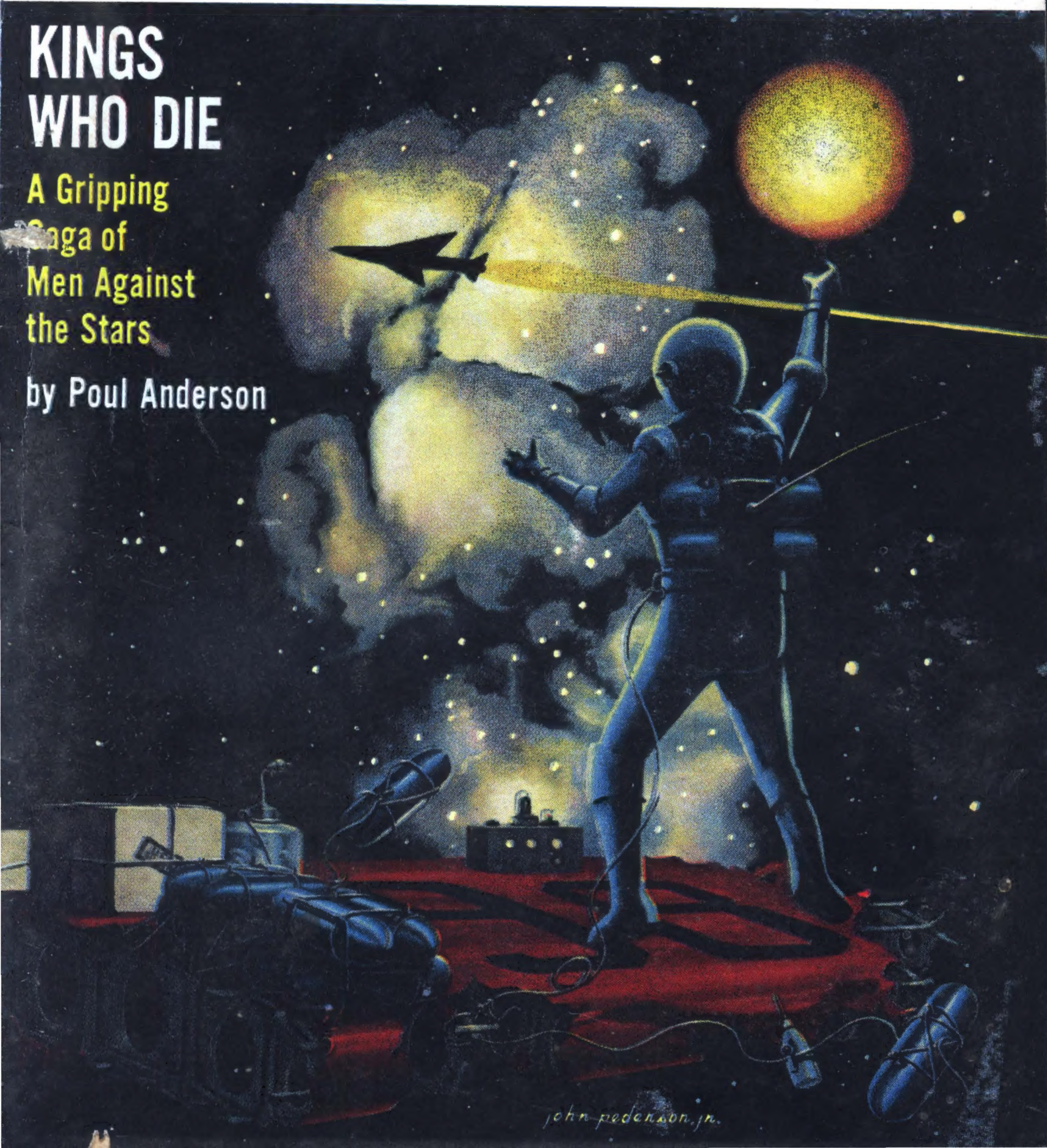
The Madman From Earth by Keith Laumer • Tybalt by Stephen Barr

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Men Against
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by Poul Anderson



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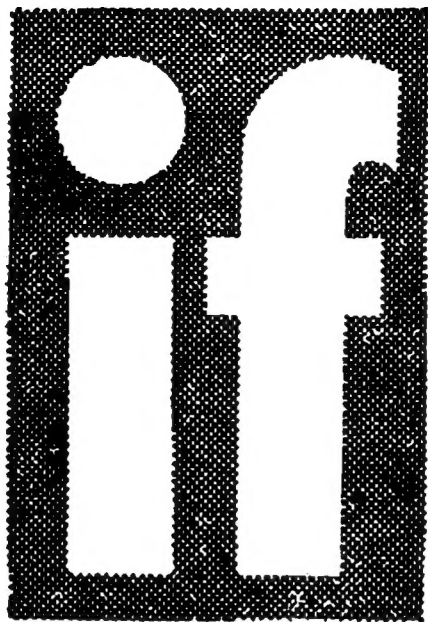
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Vol. 12, Number 1

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WHO ELSE BUT YOU?

By The Editor

WE are told that a famed psychologist attended a symposium recently in a Scandinavian country—a big across-the-board kind of a shindig embracing physical and mental sciences, where the physicists could be expected to attend the biologists' lectures. There were of course a hundred or more papers to be read.

As it turned out, only a half-dozen or so were presented. Without prearrangement, without any specific announcement, the symposium turned into a vast week-long brainstorm session, Topic A being mankind's present predicament.

We don't know the rest of the story—what was discussed in detail, what was decided, and what was decided about what to do about what

was decided. We can assure you that the story is true. (We know who the psychologist is: we're trying to get to meet him.) And from this chair, it's an impressive one.

This was the big league. These scientists, from many nations and representing many schools and disciplines, unhesitatingly threw themselves into a basic, general, human task, at the expense of their own specialties. You know how it is with specialties. The more you live with 'em, the more you love 'em. When you come to think about it, what happened at that symposium was near-miraculous. Maybe part of the reason it could happen is the growing recognition, through and through the scientific world, that compartmentization of experts is no longer the way to get

ahead. Most of the reason, though, is the simple fact that humanity cannot long continue halfway through the nuclear knothole. We have to find a way to survive or we won't survive, and that is the stark and simple truth.

The picture of a widely assorted group of bigbrains in a wide-spectrum cranium cantata makes one think (of all things) of science fiction Conferences and Conventions. Bearing firmly in mind the renowned Surgeon Revelation ("Ninety percent of sf is unadulterated crud, because ninety percent of *everything* is unadulterated crud") the fact remains that sf people—writers, readers, editors, but especially readers—have certain advantages when it comes to instituting searches for answers. The attache-case crowd sometimes refer to brainstorm sessions as "blue-sky" thinking. They mean, we think, "unlimited"; but from its earliest infancy, sf was never bound by so close a fence as the sky. The nearby grounds have been combed and curried for an answer, and it obviously isn't anywhere within conventional thinking. If one can be thought up, it's going to have to come from pretty far out. There's a small but live chance that someone as screwball as thee and me might find it.

IT would, of course, have to be something workable; but don't let that curb your

WHO ELSE BUT YOU?

preliminary thinking. If we start with as many cockeyed ideas as possible, each sparking the next, who knows? And if The Answer emerged, who'd listen to us?

Just to start some fights, let's begin with the old idea that a person can be put into a state of suspended animation in the event that his disease is incurable, so that in a year or five or a hundred he can be revived and cured by a medical science which has at last caught up with his affliction. Now: we put everybody in the whole damn world in suspended animation but for, say, the Big Bend Science Fiction Club, and let them figure it out for us, to wake us up if they find an answer, or if they don't, well, don't.

We are by no means suggesting that sf club meetings, Conferences and Conventions drop everything from hooch to Hugo in favor of grim discussions on "After Mankind—What?"

It's just that it occurs to us that if there is an Answer, the chances are it'll come from someone whose mind recognizes no horizons whatever, who knows a little something about logical thinking, and who knows where he can find a bunch of people who won't tap their foreheads at a somewhat far-out idea.

So...challenge: In the long run—the longest possible practical run—what are we going to do? **END**



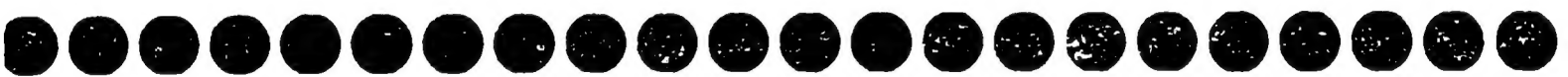
KINGS WHO DIE

One little village couldn't have a monopoly on all the
bad breaks in the world.

BY JIM HARMON

They did, though!

DANGEROUS



QUARRY

THEY say automation makes jobs, especially if "they" are trying to keep their own job of selling automation machines. I know the Actuarvac made one purple passion of a job for me, the unpleasantly fatal results of which are still lingering with me.

Thad McCain, my boss at Manhattan-Universal Insurance, beamed over the sprawling automatic brain's silver gauges and plastic toggles as proudly as if he had just personally gave birth to it. "This will simplify your job to the point of a pleasant diversion, Madison."

"Are you going to keep paying me for staying with my little hobby?" I asked, suspiciously eyeing my chrome competitor.

"The Actuarvac poses no threat to your career. It will

merely keep you from flying off on wild-goose chases. It will unvaryingly separate from the vast body of legitimate claims the phony ones they try to spike us for. Then all that remains is for you to gather the accessory details, the evidence to jail our erring customers."

"Fine," I said. I didn't bother to inform him that that was all my job had ever been.

McCain shuffled his cards. They were cards for the machine, listing new individual claims on company policies. Since the two-month-old machine was literate and could read typewriting, the cards weren't coded or punched. He read the top one. "Now this, for instance. No adjuster need investigate this accident. The circumstances obviously are such that no false claim could

be filed. Of course, the brain will make an unfailing analysis of all the factors involved and clear the claim automatically and officially."

McCain threaded the single card into the slot for an example to me. He then flicked the switch and we stood there watching the monster ruminate thoughtfully. It finally rang a bell and spit the card back at Manhattan-Universal's top junior vice-president.

He took it like a man.

"That's what the machine is for," he said philosophically. "To detect human error. Hmm. What kind of a shove do you get out of this?"

He handed me the rejected claim card. I took it, finding a new, neatly typed notation on it. It said:

Investigate the Ozark village of Granite City.

"You want me to project it in a movie theater and see how it stands it all alone in the dark?" I asked.

"Just circle up the wagon train and see how the Indians fall," McCain said anxiously.

"It's too general. What does the nickel-brained machine mean by investigating a whole town? I don't know if it has crooked politics, a polygamy colony or a hideout for supposedly deported gangsters. I don't care much either. It's not my business. How could a whole town be filing false life and accident claims?"

"Find that out," he said. "I

trust the machine. There have been cases of mass collusion before. Until you get back, we are making no more settlements with that settlement."

RESEARCH. To a writer that generally means legally permissible plagiarism. For an insurance adjuster, it means earnest work.

Before I headed for the hills, or the Ozark Mountains, I walked a few hundred feet down the hall and into the manual record files. The brain abstracted from empirical data but before I planed out to Granite City I had to find the basis for a few practical, nasty suspicions.

Four hours of flipping switches and looking at microfilm projections while a tawny redhead in a triangular fronted uniform carried me reels to order gave me only two ideas. Neither was very original. The one that concerned business was that the whole village of Granite City must be accident-prone.

I rejected that one almost immediately. While an accident-prone was in himself a statistical anomaly, the idea of a whole town of them gathered together stretched the fabric of reality to the point where even an invisible reweaver couldn't help it.

There was an explanation for the recent rise in the accident rate down there. The rock quarry there had gone into high-level operation. I

by Jim Harmon

knew why from the floor, walls, ceiling border, table trimmings in the records room. They were all granite. The boom in granite for interior and exterior decoration eclipsed earlier periods of oak, plastics, wrought iron and baked clay completely. The distinctive grade of granite from Granite City was being put into use all over the planet and in the Officer's Clubs on the Moon and Mars.

Yet the rise in accident, compared to the rise in production, was out of all proportion.

Furthermore, the work at the quarry could hardly explain the excessive accident reports we had had from the village as far back as our records went.

We had paid off on most of the claims since they seemed irrefutably genuine. All were complete with eye-witness reports and authenticated circumstances.

There was one odd note in the melodic scheme: We had never had a claim for any kind of automobile accident from Granite City.

I shut off the projector.

It may be best to keep an open mind, but I have found in practice that you have to have some kind of working theory which you must proceed to prove is either right or wrong.

Tentatively, I decided that for generations the citizens of Granite City had been in an
DANGEROUS QUARRY

organized conspiracy to defraud Manhattan-Universal and its predecessors of hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of dollars in false accident claims.

Maybe they made their whole livelihood off us before the quarry opened up.

I used my pocket innercom and had my secretary get me a plane reservation and a gun.

After so many profitable decades, Granite City wasn't going to take kindly to my spoil-sport interference.

THE Absinthe Flight to Springfield was jolly and relatively fast. Despite headwinds we managed Mach 1.6 most of the way. My particular stewardess was a blonde, majoring in Video Psychotherapy in her night courses. I didn't have much time to get acquainted or more than hear the outline of her thesis on the guilt purgings effected by The Life and Legend of Gary Cooper. The paunchy businessman in the next lounge was already nibbling the ear of his red-haired hostess. He was the type of razorback who took the girls for granted and aimed to get his money's worth. I gave Helen, the blonde, a kiss on the cheek and began flipping through the facsimiles in my briefcase as we chute-braked for a landing at the Greater Ozarks.

It took me a full five minutes to find out that I couldn't take a copter to Gran-

ite City. Something about downdrafts in the mountains.

Since that put me back in the days of horsepower, I trotted over to the automobile rental and hired a few hundred of them under the hood of a Rolls. That was about the only brand of car that fit me. I hadn't been able to get my legs into any other foreign car since I was fifteen, and I have steadfastly refused to enter an American model since they all sold out their birthrights as passenger cars and went over to the tractor-trailer combinations they used only for cargo trucks when I was a boy. Dragging around thirty feet of car is sheer nonsense, even for prestige.

It was a tiresome fifty-mile drive, on manual all the way after I left the radar-channel area of the city. Up and down, slowing for curves, flipping into second for the hills.

The whole trip hardly seemed worth it when I saw the cluster of painted frame buildings that was Granite City. They looked like a tumble of dingy building blocks tossed in front of a rolled-up indigo sports shirt. That was Granite Mountain in the near foreground. But I remembered that over the course of some forty years the people in these few little stacks of lumber had taken Manhattan-Universal for three quarters of a megabuck.

I turned off onto the gravel road, spraying my fenders

with a hail of a racket. Then I stepped down hard on my brakes, bracing myself to keep from going through the wind-screen. I had almost side-swiped an old man sitting at the side of the road, huddled in his dusty rags.

"Are you okay?" I yelled, thumbing down the window.

"I've suffered no harm at your hands—or your wheels, sir. But I could use some help," the old man said. "Could I trouble you for a lift when you leave town?"

I wasn't too sure about that. Most of these guys who are on the hobo circuit talking like they owned some letters to their names besides their initials belonged to some cult or other. I try to be as tolerant as I can, and some of my best friends are thugs, but I don't want to drive with them down lonely mountain roads.

"We'll see what we can work out," I said. "Right now can you tell me where I can find Marshal Thompson?"

"I can," he said. "But you will have to walk there."

"Okay. It shouldn't be much of a walk in Granite City."

"It's the house at the end of the street."

"It is," I said. "Why shouldn't I drive up there? The street's open."

The old man stared at me with red-shot eyes. "Marshal Thompson doesn't like people to run automobiles on the streets of Granite City."

"So I'll just *lock* the car up

by Jim Harmon

and walk over there. I couldn't go getting tire tracks all over your clean streets."

The old man watched as I climbed down and locked up the Rolls.

"You would probably get killed if you did run the car here, you know," he said conversationally.

"Well," I said, "I'll be getting along." I tried to walk sideways so I could keep an eye on him.

"Come back," he said, as if he had doubts.

The signs of a menacing conspiracy were growing stronger, I felt. I had my automatic inside my shirt, but I decided I might need a less lethal means of expression. Without breaking stride, I scooped up a baseball-size hunk of bluish rock from the road and slipped it into my small change pocket.

I have made smarter moves in my time.

As I approached the house at the end of the lane, I saw it was about the worse construction job I had seen in my life. It looked as architecturally secure as a four-year-old's drawing of his home. The angles were measurably out of line. Around every nail head were two nails bent out of shape and hammered down, and a couple of dozen welts in the siding where the hammer had missed any nail. The paint job was spotty and streaked. Half the panes in the windows were cracked. I

DANGEROUS QUARRY

fought down the dust in my nose, afraid of the consequences of a sneeze to the place.

My toe scuffed the top porch step and I nearly crashed face first into the front door. I had been too busy looking at the house, I decided. I knocked.

M o m e n t s later, the door opened.

The lean-faced man who greeted me had his cheeks crisscrossed with razor nicks and his shirt on wrong side out. But his eyes were bright and sparrow alert.

"Are you Mr. Marshal Thompson, the agent for Manhattan-Universal Insurance?" I put to him.

"I'm *the* marshal, name of Thompson. But you ain't the first to take my title for my Christian name. You from the company?"

"Yes," I said. "Were you expecting me?"

Thompson nodded. "For forty-one years."

THOMPSON served the coffee in the chipped cups, favoring only slightly his burned fingers.

Catching the direction of my glance, he said, "Company is worth a few scalds, Mr. Madison."

I accepted the steaming cup and somehow it very nearly slipped out of my hands. I made a last microsecond retrieve.

The marshal n o d d e d

thoughtfully. "You're new here."

"First time," I said, sipping coffee. It was awful. He must have made a mistake and put salt into it instead of sugar.

"You think the claims I've been filing for my people are false?"

"The home office has some suspicions of that," I admitted.

"I don't blame them, but they ain't. Look, the company gambles on luck, doesn't it?"

"No. It works on percentages calculated from past experience."

"But I mean it knows that there will be, say, a hundred fatal car crashes in a day. But it doesn't know if maybe ninety of them will be in Iowa and only ten in the rest of the country."

"There's something to that. We call it probability, not luck."

"Well, probability says that more accidents are going to occur in Granite City than anywhere else in the country, per capita."

I shook my head at Thompson. "That's not probability. Theoretically, anything can happen but I don't—I can't—believe that in this town everybody has chanced to be an accident prone. Some other factor is operating. You are all deliberately faking these falls and fires—"

"We're not," Thompson snapped.

"Or else something is caus-

ing you to have this trouble. Maybe the whole town is a bunch of dope addicts. Maybe you grow your own mescal-in or marijuana; it's happened before."

Thompson laughed.

"Whatever is going on, I'm going to find it out. I don't care what you do, but if I can find a greater risk here and prove it, the Commission will let us up our rates for this town. Probably beyond the capacity of these people, I'm afraid."

"That would be a real tragedy, Mr. Madison. Insurance is vital to this town. Nobody could survive a year here without insurance. People pay me for their premiums before they pay their grocery bills."

I shrugged, sorrier than I could let on. "I won't be able to pay for my own groceries, marshal, if I don't do the kind of job the company expects. I'm going to snoop around."

"All right," he said grudgingly, "but you'll have to do it on foot."

"Yes, I understood you didn't like cars on your streets. At least not the cars of outsiders."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it. Nobody in Granite City owns a car. It would be suicide for anybody to drive a car, same as it would be to have a gas or oil stove, instead of coal, or to own a bathtub."

I took a deep breath.

"Showers," Thompson said.

by Jim Harmon

"With nonskid mats and hand-rails."

I shook hands with him. "You've been a great help."

"Four o'clock," he said. "Roads are treacherous at night."

"There's always a dawn."

Thompson met my eyes. "That's not quite how we look at it here."

II

THE quarry was a mess.

I couldn't see any in the way they sliced the granite out of the mountain. The idea of a four-year-old—a four-year-old moron—going after a mound of raspberry ice cream kept turning up in my mind as I walked around.

The workmen were gone; it was after five local time. But here and there I saw traces of them. Some of them were sandwich wrappers and cigarette stubs, but most of the traces were smears of blood. Blood streaked across sharp rocks, blood oozing from beneath heavy rocks, blood smeared on the handles and working surfaces of sledge hammers and tools. The place was as gory as a battlefield.

"What are you looking for, bud?"

The low, level snarl had come from a burly character in a syn-leather jacket and narrow-brimmed Stetson.

"The reason you have so many accidents here," I said frankly. "I'm from the insur-

ance company. Name's Madison."

"Yeah, I know."

I had supposed he would.

"I'm Kelvin, the foreman here," the big man told me, extending a ham of a fist to be shook. "Outside, doing my Army time, I noticed that most people don't have as many slipups as we do here. Never could figure it out."

"This rock is part of it—"

"What do you mean by that!" Kelvin demanded savagely.

"I mean the way you work it. No system to it. No stratification, no plateau work..."

"Listen, Madison, don't talk about what you don't know anything about. The stuff in these walls isn't just rock; it isn't even plain granite. Granite City exports some of the finest grade of the stone in the world. And it's used all over the world. We aren't just a bunch of meatheaded ditch diggers—we are craftsmen. We have to figure a different way of getting out every piece of stone."

"It's too bad."

"What's too bad?"

"That you chose the wrong way so often," I said.

Kelvin breathed a virile grade of tobacco into my face. "Listen, Madison, we have been working this quarry for generations, sometimes more of us working than other times. Today most of us are working getting the stone out. That's the way we like it. We

don't want any outsider coming in and interfering with that."

"If this quarry has anything to do with defrauding Manhattan-Universal, I can tell you that I will do something about that!"

As soon as my teeth clicked back together, the sickening feeling hit me that I shouldn't have said that.

THE general store was called a supermarket, but it wasn't particularly superior.

I took a seat at the soda fountain and took a beer, politely declining the teen-age clerk's offer of a shot of white lightning from the Pepsi-Cola fountain syrup jug for a quarter.

Behind me were three restaurant tables and one solitary red-upholstered booth. Two men somewhere between forty and sixty sat at the nearest table playing twenty-one.

Over the foam of my stein I saw the old man I had almost run down in the road. He marched through the two-thirds of the building composed of rows of can goods and approached the fat man at the cash register.

"Hello, Professor," the fat man said. "What can we do for you?"

"I'd like to mail a letter," he said in an urgent voice.

"Sure, Professor, I'll send it right off on the facsimile machine as soon as I get a free moment."

"You're sure you can send it? Right away?"

"Positive. Ten cents, Professor."

The professor fumbled in his pants' pocket and fished out a dime. He fingered it thoughtfully.

"I suppose the letter can wait," he said resignedly. "I believe I will buy a pair of doughnuts, Mr. Haskel."

"Why not get a hamburger, Professor? Special sale today. Only a dime. And since you're such a good customer I'll throw in a cup of coffee and the two sinkers for nothing."

"That's—kind of you," the old man said awkwardly.

Haskel shrugged. "A man has to eat."

The man called "the professor" came over and sat down two stools away, ignoring me. The clerk dialed his hamburger and served it.

I stayed with my beer and my thoughts.

More and more, I was coming to believe that Granite City wasn't a job for an investigative adjuster like myself but a psychological adjuster. Crime is a structural flaw in a community, yes. But when the whole society is criminal, distorted, you can't isolate the flaw. The whole village was meat for a sociologist; let him figure out why otherwise decent citizens felt secure in conspiracy to defraud an honored corporation.

I didn't feel that I was licked or that the trip had

by Jim Harmon

been a failure. I had merely established to my intuitive satisfaction that the job was not in my field.

I glanced at the old man. The proprietor of the store knew him and evidently thought him harmless enough to feed.

"I think I can make it down the mountain before dark, Old Timer," I called over to him. "You can come along if you like."

The acne-faced kid behind the counter stared at me. I looked over and caught the bright little eyes of Haskel, the proprietor, too. Finally, the old professor turned on his stool, his face pale and his eyes sad and resigned.

"I doubt very much if either of us will be leaving, Mr. Madison," he said. "Now."

I took my beer and the professor his coffee over to the single booth. We looked at each other across the shiny table and our beverage containers.

"I am Doctor Arnold Parnell of Duke University," the professor said. "I left on my sabbatical five months ago. I have been here ever since."

I looked at his clothes. "You must not have been very well fixed for a year's vacation, Professor."

"I," he said, "have enough traveler's checks with me to paper a washroom. Nobody in this town will cash them for me."

DANGEROUS QUARRY

"I can understand why you want to go somewhere where people are more trusting in that case."

"They know the checks are good. It's *me* they refuse to trust to leave this place. They think they can't let *me* go."

"I don't see any shackles on you," I remarked.

"Just because you can't see them," he growled, "doesn't mean they aren't there. Marshal Thompson has the only telephone in the village. He has politely refused to let me use it. I'm a suspicious and undesirable character; he's under no obligation to give me telephone privileges, he says. Haskel has the Post Office concession—the Telefax outfit behind the money box over there. He takes my letters but I never see him send them off. And I never get a reply."

"Unfriendly of them," I said conservatively. "But how can they stop you from packing your dental floss and cutting out?"

"Haskel has the only motor vehicle in town—a half-ton pick-up, a minuscule contrivance less than the size of a passenger car. He makes about one trip a week down into the city for supplies and package mail. He's been the only one in or out of Granite City for five months."

It seemed incredible—more than that, unlikely, to me. "How about the granite itself? How do they ship it out?"

"It's an artificial demand

product, like diamonds," Professor Parnell said. "They stockpile it and once a year the executive offices for the company back in Nashville runs in a portable monorail railroad up the side of the mountain to take it out. That won't be for another four months, as nearly as I can find out. I may not last that long."

"How are you living?" I asked. "If they won't take your checks—"

"I do odd jobs for people. They feed me, give me a little money sometimes."

"I can see why you want to ride out with me," I said. "Haven't you ever thought of just *walking* out?"

"Fifty miles down a steep mountain road? I'm an old man, Mr. Madison, and I've gotten even older since I came to Granite City."

I nodded. "You have any papers, any identification, to back this up?"

Wordlessly, he handed over his billfold, letters, enough identification to have satisfied Allen Pinkerton or John Edgar Hoover.

"Okay," I drawled. "I'll accept your story for the moment. Now answer me the big query: Why are the good people of Granite City doing this to you? By any chance, you wouldn't happen to know of a mass fraud they are perpetrating on Manhattan-Universal?"

"I know nothing of their ethical standards," Parnell said, "but I do know that they

are absolutely *subhuman*!"

"I admit I have met likelier groups of human beings in my time."

"No, understand me. These people are literally subhuman—they are inferior to other human beings."

"Look, I know the Klan is a growing organization but I can't go along with you."

"Madison, understand me, I insist. Ethnologically speaking, it is well known that certain tribes suffer certain deficiencies due to diet, climate, et cetera. Some can't run, sing, use mathematics. The people of Granite City have the most unusual deficiency on record, I admit. Their *psionic* senses have been impaired. They are completely devoid of any use of telepathy, precognition, telekinesis."

"BECAUSE they aren't supermen, that doesn't mean that they are submen," I protested. "I don't have any psionic abilities either."

"But you do!" Parnell said earnestly. "Everybody has some psionics ability, but we don't realize it. We don't have the fabulous abilities of a few recorded cases of supermen, but we have some, a trace. Granite City citizens have *no* psionic ability whatsoever, not even the little that you and I and the rest of the world have!"

"You said you were Duke University, didn't you?" I mused. "Maybe you know

by Jim Harmon

what you are talking about; I've never been sure. But these people can't suffer very much from their lack of what you call psi ability."

"I tell you they do," he said hoarsely. "We never realize it but we all have some power of precognition. If we didn't, we would have a hundred accidents a day—just as these people *do*. They can't foresee the bump in the road the way we can, or that that particular match will flare a little higher and burn their fingers. There are other things, as well. You'll find it is almost impossible to carry on a lengthy conversation with any of them—they have no telepathic ability, no matter how slight, to see through the semantic barrier. None of them can play ball. They don't have the unconscious psionic ability to influence the ball in flight. All of us can do that, even if the case of a 'Poltergeist' who can lift objects is rare."

"Professor, you mean these people are holding you here simply so you won't go out and tell the rest of the world that they are submen?"

"They don't want the world to know *why* they are psionically subnormal," he said crisply. "It's the *granite*! I don't understand why myself. I'm not a physicist or a biologist. But for some reason the heavy concentration and particular pattern of the radioactive radiation in its matrix is responsible for both inhibiting the

DANGEROUS QUARRY

genes that transmit psi powers from generation to generation *and* affecting those abilities in the present generation. A kind of psionic sterility."

"How do you know this?"

"We haven't the time for all that. But think about it. What else *could* it be? It's that granite that they are shipping all over the world, spreading the contamination. I want to stop that contamination. To the people of Granite City that means ruining their only industry, putting them all out of work. They are used to this psionic sterility; they don't see anything so bad about it. Besides, like everybody else, they have some doubts that there really are such things as telepathy and the rest to be affected."

"Frankly," I said, hedging only a little, "I don't know what to make of your story. This is something to be decided by somebody infallible—like the Pope or the President or Board Chairman of Manhattan-Universal. But the first thing to do is get you out of here. We had better get back to my car. I've got good lights to get down the mountain."

Parnell jumped up eagerly, and brushed over his china mug, staining the tabletop with brown caffeine.

"Sorry," he said. "I should have been precognizant of that. I try to stay away from the rock as much as possible, but it's getting to me."

I should have remembered something then. But, naturally, I didn't.

IT was the time when you could argue about whether it was twilight or night. In the deep dusk, the Rolls looked to be a horror-flicker giant bug. I fumbled for the keys. Then the old man made me break stride by digging narrow fingers into my bicep.

Marshal Thompson and the bulky quarry foreman, Kelvin, stepped out of the shadow of the car.

"First, throw away that gun of yours, Mr. Madison," the marshal said.

I looked at his old pistol that must have used old powder cartridges, instead of liquid propellants, and forked out my Smith & Wesson with two fingers, letting it plop at my feet.

"I'm afraid we can't let you spread the professor's lies, Mr. Madison," Thompson said.

"You planning on killing me?" I asked with admirable restraint.

"I hope not. You can have the run of the town, like the professor. I'll tell your company you are making a *thorough* investigation. Then maybe in a few weeks or months I can arrange so it looks like you were killed—someplace outside."

"We don't aim to let any crazy fanatic like Parnell ruin our business, our whole town," Kelvin interjected bitterly.

I took a pause to make abstractions on the situation. I glanced at the little man at my right. "Parnell, my car is our only chance of getting out of here. If they stop us from getting in that car, we'll be bums here on town charity for the rest of our lives."

"No!" Parnell gave a terrier yell and charged the gun in the old marshal's hand.

It seemed as if it would take me too long to recover my gun from the dirt, but almost instinctively I felt the rock in the pocket of my pants.

I scooped out the sample of granite and heaved it at the head of the old cop. But my control seemed completely shot. It missed the old man's head with an appalling gap and hit the roof of the Rolls.

Fortunately, the granite radiations didn't influence non-human-oriented factors of chance. The stone bounced off the car and struck the marshal's gun hand.

Thompson dropped his gun and I reached for mine in the dust, vaguely aware of Kelvin pumping toward me.

I straightened up. He led with his right, of all damn things. I blocked it with my gun hand and let him have my left in the midst of his solar plexus. He crumpled prettier than a paper doll.

When the dust cleared, Professor Parnell was sitting on Thompson's chest.

"Hooray," I said, "for our side."

THE people had made one mistake. They thought people would believe us.

Parnell and I broke the story to some newspaper friends of mine. They gave it a play in the mistaken belief the professor and I were starting our own cult, and the equal-time law is firm. But nobody paid any more attention to us than to the Hedonists, the Klan, the Soft-shelled Baptists or the Reformed Agnostics.

I tried to get Thad McCain to realize all the money this cursed granite was costing us in accident claims, but it wasn't easy. Manhattan-Universal owned stock in Granite City Products, Inc. And we had spent a quarter of a megabuck modernizing our offices with granite only months before.

"McCain," I said earnestly, "will you just let me feed the new data we've got from Parnell into the Actuarvac? It's infallible. See what it says."

"Very well," McCain said with a sigh. He let me feed the big brain the hypothesis I had got from Parnell. It chattered to itself for some minutes and at last flipped a card into the slot.

I dug the pasteboard out and read it. It said:

No such place as Granite City exists.

"The rock has got to the machine," I screamed. "Chief, DANGEROUS QUARRY

this brain is stoned. It's made a *mistake*. We *know* there is such a place."

"Nonsense, my boy," McCain said in a fatherly way. "The Actuarvac merely means that no such place as you erroneously described could possibly exist. Why don't you try one of our Hedonist revival meetings tonight?"

THINGS have got steadily worse since then.

So far nobody has made the big mistake of dropping an H-bomb on anyone, but that's probably because all the governments made so many smaller mistakes the people made the mistake (or was it?) of kicking them out for almost absolute anarchy. But the individuals are doing worse than the governments...if that's possible.

People have given up going anywhere except by foot, for the most part.

Granite City granite is still as widely disbursed and almost as highly prized as South African diamonds.

I hope we will find some way out of our current world crisis, although I can't imagine what it will be.

Meanwhile, I hope you will excuse any typographical errors. It seems as if I just can't seem to hit the right keys on my typewriter any more, as my—and all of our—psionic sterility increases.

I ask hugh—wear wall it owl end?

END

ALEXANDER

GRAHAM BELL

AND ME

BY THEODORE STURGEON

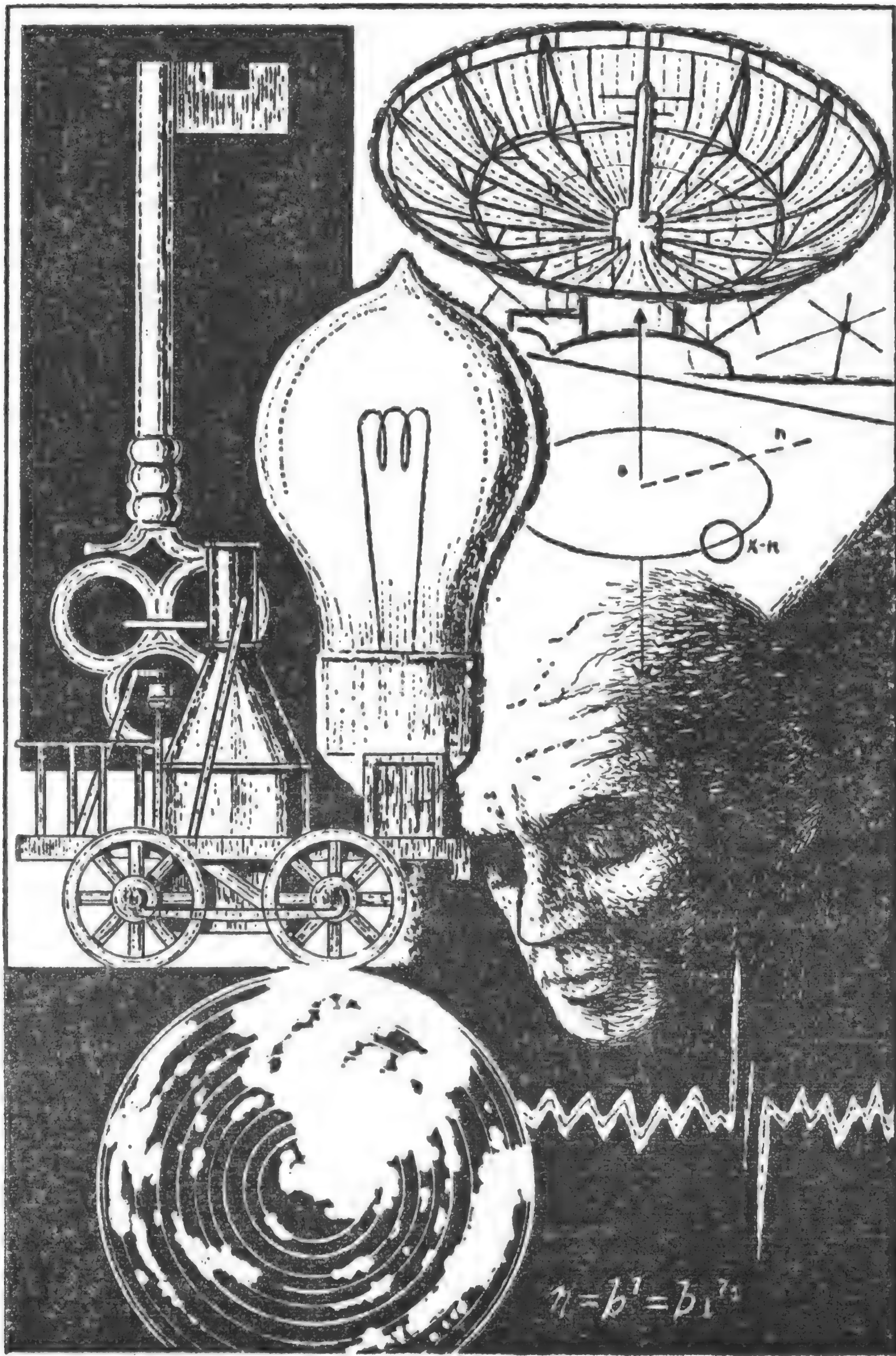
ILLUSTRATED BY DYAS

SOME years ago—in the fall of 1944, to be exact—your reporter had one of those (in the biographical sense) epochal encounters after which, like the first day in high school, the first really bad storm at sea, the first story check, one's life is never quite the same. I met a man called Will Jenkins, and he invited me out to his home.

You know him as Murray Leinster. Other readers have known him by other names, for a long, long time. (I remember his telling me that he was the only ardent reader of the *Rover Boys* who ever grew up to become their father.) Short, quiet, soft-spoken, with manners just short of the affectation called "courtly," he concealed, at the outset, his two secret weapons: a rock-hard set of high

moral principles, and a rare, perhaps unique approach to science.

On that first visit Will showed me some things he had tinkered up: an oval wheel with two axles, which kept one long side on the ground, and which he felt might be a sensible substitute for endless treads on tractors and tanks; how to drill a one twenty-five thousandth of an inch hole through a piece of glass (I understand he later patented this as a way to perforate contact lenses to permit circulation of natural tears); a device for reproducing irregular surfaces; a model of a device to make possible three-dimensional photography; and a demonstration, viewable by the naked eye, of a monomolecular layer. While I ate Greek meatballs (the



best I have ever tasted, which were lovingly made by his loving wife Mary) he described to me his invention of a device which would permit a minesweeper's paravane cable to contact the anchor chain of a mine and pass through it, leaving the mine right where it was. That one was never debugged; in time, marine growth would foul it. But it was breathtakingly ingenious and—like all his inspirations—kindergarten-simple.

This article is about science and invention, but I would like to say parenthetically that during this and many subsequent visits, we talked about something else—writing in general, sf in particular. Will Jenkins gave me certain aids and precepts, each of them brilliantly simple and simply brilliant, which I follow to this day. I don't think I have ever before made public acknowledgement of this: I do herewith. It is a debt I shall never be able to repay.

NOW, the really remarkable thing about these gimmicks and gadgets of his, something which transcends their cleverness, is that each and every one of them was snivvied up out of materials which cost from zero all the way up to fifty cents. And had he a workshop? He had not. He lived in one of those brick-face ten-story apartment houses on Long Island, sur-

rounded by a number of daughters (all pretty) and vast numbers of their friends, all of whom seemed welcome at all times. Not only had he no workshop, he had no office, den or studio. There was an elderly upright typewriter on a castered typing table in a corner of the living room, and that was, so help me, all the indication there was that there might be a writer in the place.

It isn't that he could not have had a den of his own had he wanted it—I'm sure he could. He simply seemed to prefer to work in a corner of the room, at the edge of this dynamic domesticity. It cost him, apparently, no pain to stop between sentences and drive down to pick up a kid at school, or to sweat out someone's second-year algebra. And just by the way, I think he burned no midnight oil.

Yet, living like this, he turned out solid story after story, making himself a mainstay of the old *Thrilling Wonder*, *Startling Stories* and *Astounding* during what has come to be known as the Golden Age of sf.

But let's look at the part of Will Jenkins which produced these fabulous gilhoolies of his. His tools were scissors and paste, a paper-punch, tweezers, paperclips, some dime-store pliers and a screw-driver. His materials were coat-hangers, cardboard, a few

stray Erector-set parts, string, a second-hand pane or two of window glass, some old twists of wire and a No. 6 dry cell. He used, also, that extraordinary mind, honed sharp, placed at a unique angle, powered by a specialized curiosity and aimed at an unexpected direction.

This specialty is the orphaned twigs on the tree of science. His aim was at their bases, the places where the thick main boughs grew toward their several sections of sky, caring little about these slender offshoots. For such is science that its primary limbs, carrying upward the currents of invention and technology, are covered with neglected shoots. And it would seem that the upper, later, more recent branches are quite as hairy as the main trunk. All along the way, little-noted, bypassed phenomena are waiting for the man who can administer just the right squirt of vital fluid. Such a twig can grow into a mighty arm of the tree, even if it has been dormant for years.

A perfect example is radar, which was a recorded phenomenon fifty years before radio. And in a lesser—far lesser—area there is that which I call the Kick Yourself Department.

The Kick Yourself Department is that species of invention which someone comes up with and makes a classic buck, and when you see it you kick

yourself for not having thought of it first. In the Department are obvious, simple or even simple-minded inventions.

Such controversial inspirations as Ehrenhaft's magnetic flux and the Hieronymous machine do not qualify. A thing like the hula hoop does. Yo-yos. The beanie with the propellers spinning on it. Cadillac's new turn light which, activated by the directional switch, floods the road on the side to which you are about to turn, with a beam pointed 45° off the centerline: you see what you're turning into. The rotary lawnmower. Cecil Hughes's rotating-cylinder engine (if you've never heard of this jaw-dropper, look it up.)

What these all have in common is that they are based on simple principles (simple, that is, once you see them done by someone else: that's when you kick yourself) which were evident or self-evident; which filled a want or need which had existed for a long time (the beanie could have been perfected in the eleventh century, the turn light forty years ago)...and which needed no more brains than you have to produce.

THE Class Two Kick Yourself inventions are those filling a new demand, resulting, for example, from some technological improvement. I disclose herewith (Messrs.

S w i n g-A-W a y and **E c k o** please attend: I would like to see if you kick yourselves) my own invention of a soft-rubber suction cup on a swivel, surrounding the magnetic lid-catcher on my wall-mounted can opener. Yes, Junior, I know the magnet works just fine. But Junior—they're starting to make cans out of aluminum.

Other examples of Class Two K.Y-S ideas are a nationwide magazine on TV subjects, with regional program listings bound in (and *TV Guide* has pulled itself up into *Life's* circulation league in a few short years); dish detergents (tri-sodium phosphate, key ingredient, had been around for years as a wetting agent in industry before anyone thought to make it a consumer item; meanwhile the electric dishwasher, all but perfected in the late twenties, sat around waiting for it); and the many tools and attachments, like the screw-pilot bit, which drills for thread, shank and countersink all at once, which awaited the advent of the portable drill, yet still hung around unborn.

Class One devices, when you come right down to it, are really only Class Two devices which just took a long time getting thought of.

Science is full of neglected but unhidden wonders. Will Jenkins' microscopic hole-drilling technique is based on

a phenomenon known to Benjamin Franklin; another of his inventions, used as a TV effect, derives from an illusion used a century ago by stage magicians. Granted that they await your exploitation and mine, where do we go to find them?

Why, back down the trunk of the Tree of Science, of course. There are some brilliant men around today: so there were fifty and a hundred and two hundred years ago. Today, of course, our thinking has the immense advantage of advanced systemization and sophisticated tools and equipment. Research progresses into the future like a mighty be-chromed locomotive flashing through the countryside. The researchers of the past, on the other hand, went through the landscape on foot, picking their way. The rails weren't laid yet... and *that* advantage is in some ways immenser. For those boys paced along slowly with their eyes wide open. They may have followed a wrong trail occasionally, and overlooked a right one here and there. But they investigated many more things than the modern, all horsepower and momentum, has time for.

These are the researches which always delighted Will Jenkins, and their kind of thinking was his kind of thinking when he built his oval wheel and when he showed me, over his kitchen

sink, a demonstrated monomolecular layer.

BUT if you would like to look at some of the things they observed, and discovered, and theorized about, you've got to get the fog out of your eyes. This fog runs out of the corners of your mouth when you put on that grin.

Because an old book records the speed of light at 192,500 mps and electricity through wires at "not less than 200,000 mps" and 12,000 mps respectively for short—you put on that grin.

...Malarial poison is generally most troublesome in those years in which there has been a deficiency in the rainfall. ...under these circumstances the water in marshes having fallen below its normal level, the black slime of organic matter forming their beds has been exposed to the strong heat of the summer sun, and the malarial emanations thereby increased in quantity and intensity. Low water in...great rivers...is also followed by increase in and aggravation of malarial troubles... Malaria likewise occurs from the mere upturning of earth which has been undisturbed for many years... Even the ploughing of an old or-

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL and ME

chard is not without its effect (but) if the upturning is done late in the fall, and the earth exposed to winter frosts, there is much less probability of malarial emanations, than if the earth is turned late in the spring or during the summer. The winter air, charged as it is with ozone...exerts its destructive action upon it.

Such statements are not out-and-out wrongheaded. If they derive from ignorance, it is an innocent ignorance, not a stupid ignorance. And if the statements are used to smear everything in the book, the smearer does injustice to the author, to science and decidedly to himself.

I have such a book. It's called *Medical Physics*. It's by John C. Draper, M. D., LL. D., of N.Y.U. It was published by Lea and Co. of Philadelphia in 1885. It runs 733 pages and has nearly four hundred illustrations, mostly beautifully precise steel engravings. It is what it says it is: a textbook of physics for doctors. It deals with heat, light, electricity, hydrodynamics, and all the other classical wings of physics, and relates each to medical practice of the time. It makes absolutely fascinating reading.

But it's not going to do a thing for anyone who throws

it down because the man says malaria is caused by "sulfuretted hydrogen". I do feel, however, that it is a mother lode of Will Jenkins' kind of orphan-offshoot science.

I'd like to give you a couple of examples, but permit me this disclaimer. It may be that I'm committing an innocent ignorance in quoting these items: to the specialist in the disciplines involved, I may be reporting a justifiably discarded commonplace. All I can say is that I've read rather widely, and these items hit me as brand "new."

In following up the experiments which led to the discovery of the photophone, Prof. Graham Bell says: "In my Boston paper the discovery was announced that thin disks of very many substances *emitted sounds* when exposed to the action of a rapidly interrupted beam of sunlight...focused into one end of an open tube, the ear being at the other end. Upon interrupting the beam, a clear, musical tone was heard, the pitch of which depended upon the frequency of the interruption of the light, and the loudness upon the material composing the tube... In order to study these effects under better circumstances the materials were enclosed in a conical cav-

ity in a piece of brass closed (at the large end) by a piece of glass. A brass tube (from the small end) served for connection to a hearing-tube. When this conical cavity was stuffed with worsted or other fibrous materials the sounds were much louder than when a tube was employed... Upon smoking the interior of the conical cavity, and then exposing it to the intermittent beam, with the glass lid in position, the effect was perfectly startling. The sound was so loud as to be actually painful to an ear placed closely against the end of the hearing tube... In regard to materials...*em-sounds are produced from* employed...*the loudest substances in a loose, porous, spongy condition, and from those that have the darkest or most absorbent colors* (Italics Prof. Bell's, and by golly mine too) ...cotton-wool, worsted, fibrous materials generally, cork, sponge, platinum and other metals in a spongy condition, and from those that have the darkest or most absorbent colors.

Unless Prof. Bell is kidding us, which I genuinely doubt, he has here a kind of audio amplifier drawing no power, but using some vibratory ef-

by Theodore Sturgeon

fect of materials which, especially in "loose, porous spongy" states, ought to be pretty efficient sound *killers*.

AND here's just one more "lost" phenomenon:

If ordinary platinum be heated and then allowed to cool in hydrogen, it absorbs four times its volume of gas. Palladium offers a still more remarkable example, absorbing hydrogen not only in cooling but also when cold. If this metal is used as the pole of a voltaic battery in the electric decomposition of water, it will absorb no less than 980 times its volume of hydrogen gas. Under these circumstances the density of the gas is enormously increased. In this state it probably acts like a metal.

Let's think that over for a moment.

Do you know anybody who wants to store some hydrogen in a way that it can't leak? And suppose the hydrogen happens to be tritium: why shouldn't it work with tritium just as well?

If you don't get to read this, it's because Prof. Alexander G. Bell and I have done what Cleve Cartmill did when he went and extrapolated the Manhattan project in a science-fiction story. **END**
ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL and ME

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ROBERT M. GUINN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of September, 1961.

State of New York, No. 03-1457100. Qualified in Bronx County. Term expires March, 1963.

JACQUES N. GLIDS, Notary Public.
(SEAL)

TYBALT

BY STEPHEN BARR

ILLUSTRATED BY BURNS

Adolescence is a perilous time —
whether it is the adolescence of a man,
or of the whole race of Man!

THE physics teacher, Howard Dax, dismissed the class. He picked up a felt-covered block and erased the diagrams he had drawn on the blackboard. He noticed with annoyance that the lines were shaky, and in one place was an irregular star where the chalk had broken because of his exasperation at his pupils—or more exactly, one particular pupil.

When the blackboard was clean to the corners—Howard Dax was a very precise man—he turned around and saw that the particular pupil was still sitting at his desk. He was a thin boy of fifteen, called Mallison, whose dark, wavy hair was too long. It rose in a kind of breaker over his forehead, and he had sideburns cut to a point. His expression was neither sullen nor imperti-

nent, but Dax had always had the feeling that Mallison was concealing intense boredom and only listened to him perforce. He was sure that the narrow, rather handsome face was on the verge of sneering. But there had never been quite anything that he could put his finger on. The boy was definitely not good at physics, yet he wasn't at the bottom of the class. The thing was that he gave the impression of being above average intelligence. He obviously could do very much better if he wanted to. Dax was convinced that he despised physics, and school in general.

"Yes?" Dax said. "What is it?" He tried to make his voice sound natural and casual.

Mallison stared at him impassively for a moment. Then

he said, "You don't like me, Mr. Dax, do you?"

"My dear boy, I neither like you nor dislike you," Dax said. He could feel his hands beginning again to tremble slightly. Damn adrenalin! "I am merely trying to teach you elementary physics. Why do you ask?"

"Why do you give me such low grades?" Mallison said, but with no sense of urgent curiosity.

Howard Dax thought that the boy's manner was altogether too adult. He didn't expect deference from a modern teenager, but neither did he like to be spoken to in such a man-to-man way. No; come to think of it, man-to-man wasn't quite the phrase. It was off-hand. And yet it was artificial: Mallison never spoke in this way to his contemporaries. He usually talked like a...what was it? Hipster?

"I give students the grades that in my opinion they deserve," Dax said. "In your case they are low because I don't think you're trying."

"I am trying," Mallison said, then added, "sir."

"You are," Dax said. "Very." He thought the remark was rather neat, but the boy looked at him without any change of expression. Why was he here? What did he want to say? "I must confess," Dax went on, "that I am surprised at your interest in grades. I should have thought that rock-and-roll was more

your style. That and...er... racing around at night in a fast car!" He felt that he was sneering, and made his face blank.

"I'm too young for a driver's license," Mallison said.

"But old enough to pull yourself together and do some real work. You could do much better in class. You're not stupid."

THE boy said nothing and continued to stare at him without expression.

"When I see signs of an improved attitude," Dax said, "and a little more work, I shall mark you accordingly. One gets the impression usually that your mind is on other things. Things like jazz records."

"Didn't you listen to jazz when you were young, Mr. Dax?"

Howard Dax at thirty-nine hardly thought of himself as old. The boy was not being exactly fresh, but he had a sort of polite tactlessness. It was absurd, but he felt that Mallison had the upper hand, somehow.

Dax had an older brother who had been a lieutenant in World War II, and he had described to him an occasion on which he had interviewed an elderly staff sergeant. The staff sergeant in civilian life had been his brother's boss. Although his manner was scrupulously correct, there remained an atmosphere of his

peacetime ascendancy. Howard Dax sympathized with his brother. There was nothing actually wrong with Mallison's manner, but the pupil had the master on the defensive.

He decided to ignore Mallison's question. He had no idea how the young nowadays felt about the subject of early Benny Goodman or the emergence of Barrel House. Why was he even bothering?

"The point at issue," he said with asperity, "is not whether I used to listen to jazz twenty-five years ago, but whether you are going to pay attention in class now. I admit you manage to scrape through in the tests, but this morning, for example, you acted as if you were half asleep!"

"I'm sorry. I was very tired." Mallison did look pale.

"I suppose you were up half the night—cutting a rug."

Mallison winced at the outdated jargon but he merely shook his head. There were firm steps in the corridor, and the school principal marched in.

Mallison stood up; Dax was still standing. The principal had a small piece of folded paper in his hand, and did not immediately notice the boy, whose desk was near the back row and next the open windows. He went straight to the platform and put the folded paper on Dax's desk. He nodded curtly and glanced towards the windows, and saw

TYBALT

Mallison sitting there for the first time.

"I thought you were alone," he said, turning to Dax.

"You may go," Dax said to the boy. "That will be all. Remember what I said." He looked at the folded paper and then at the principal questioningly. "Yes, Mr. Lightstone?"

The principal was a short white-haired man with a dogged expression. He turned again to make sure the boy had left and said. "I want you to look at this, Dax." He tapped the folded paper, which had been made into a sort of envelope, with its ends tucked in. Dax bent to examine it.

"Pick it up, man! Open it," the principal said, and came around and sat in the teacher's chair. "Be careful not to spill it!"

Dax picked up the little packet and opened it. Inside was a teaspoonful of white powder. "What is it?" he asked.

"That," said the principal, "is something for our friends upstairs in the chemistry department to determine. I found it myself, in the flower-bed right outside these windows!"

Howard Dax looked puzzled. "I don't think I understand—"

"If I don't miss my bet," said the principal, "that's heroin!" He jerked his head towards the windows. "And

somebody threw it out of this classroom!"

"Oh, I don't think it's heroin, Mr. Lightstone," Dax said. "Heroin has a distinct glitter, and this seems—"

"I had the impression you were a physicist, not a chemist," the principal said. "Besides, the police told us last week that they believe a gang of narcotics pushers—I think they called them—are operating in the neighborhood! What else could it be? I've been on the lookout for something of this sort."

There was a silence. Dax didn't know what to say.

He himself was very tired, he had been working late every evening. He had three different tasks that occupied every minute of his waking hours: his job as teacher being the least important although the most essential. The other two were perhaps visionary, but they might lead to something more exciting than retiring on a pension.

"Well?" Mr. Lightstone was impatient—his usual condition. "Have you any ideas? It has been my experience that drug-taking and juvenile delinquency go together." This was not strictly true as Mr. Lightstone had never knowingly seen a drug-taker, but he did read the papers.

"I suppose there is a certain amount of delinquency here," Howard Dax said uncertainly, "but *narcotics*..."

"Wake up, man!" the prin-

incipal said. "You look half asleep! This is a serious matter. I found the stuff right outside these windows! You must have some idea of who might be involved. Which are the unruly ones? Who sits next the windows?"

Dax glanced at the desk recently left by Mallison. Mallison? One couldn't exactly call him unruly... Yet he had the earmarks of a type he detested and instinctively mistrusted. He even feared him a little, though not perhaps for reasons of which he was quite aware.

"Who was that boy that just left?" The principal had noticed the direction of Dax's glance. "Mallison, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but the packet might just as well have been thrown from one of the paths outside."

"There's no path near here. You know that perfectly well," said the principal. "There's a wide stretch of grass beyond the flower bed and no one's allowed to walk on it! I've had my eye on that boy..."

HOWARD Dax thought this over. Come to think of it, he wouldn't put such a thing past the young smart-alec. Hoodlumism doesn't necessarily advertise itself in the classroom.

He looked at the principal. The man had a nerve to accuse *him* of seeming half asleep! Working in his pri-

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vate lab after dinner and then at his desk until all hours, struggling to learn Middle English—or rather, transitional Anglo-Saxon. He had done well at English lit at college, even though majoring in science, and Chaucer had come fairly easy to him. But Twelfth Century speech—and that was what he had to learn—was something else again. Chaucer himself couldn't have understood it. He wondered what young Mallison and his hipster friends would think if they knew his secret occupations. He could just imagine the sneering.

"Well, you *could* be right," I suppose," he said. "He's not my—shall I say?—favorite pupil."

"I'm glad you think I could be right," Mr. Lightstone said. "I intend to hold an investigation. At the first possible opportunity. This very evening, in fact. At my office, and I shall have young Mallison brought before us. I shall expect you." He got up and strutted out of the class room.

After a few moments Howard Dax followed him. Outside, on his way to the gate, he passed Mallison, who was standing talking to another boy who had a similar haircut, but was unfamiliar to the physics teacher. He thought he was not a pupil of this school. They both became silent as he drew near them, looking at him without any expression. Dax wondered if

narcotics could be responsible for Mallison's pallor.

After dinner Dax went into his little lab, which was actually the kitchenette he never used. On the table and sink was some chemical apparatus. The principal's remark had been ill-chosen since Dax at college had started with chemistry as his major and had only switched to physics in his senior year. He had also become interested in genetics, and it was this all-around interest in the sciences that had perhaps militated against him. Nowadays one ought to specialize.

Well, he was specializing now.

In an evaporating dish in the sink were some dark brown crystals that his landlady would have taken for Damerara sugar, but which had a considerably more complex formula. They would have lent a rather odd flavor to Indian pudding. The logic which had given rise to this formula was not merely complex but revolutionary. It involved the concept of reversibility of entropy—the application of which was itself unprecedented.

There were, Howard Dax was aware, certain aspects of germ chemistry that defied description in terms of classical and mechanistic theory; details that seemed to require the inversion of Time's arrow. To say that a physical process was "non-reversible" usually

implied the presence of the probability factor. But that didn't seem to be the case here. There was the suggestion of prophecy. Or else that time was flowing backwards. Or...was it that something flowed backward through time?

Then there was the fact that the germ plasm was immortal. Not indestructible, for the overwhelming majority of zygotes and gametes died; but if one disregarded the soma, all living germ cells had been alive since the beginning of life. After terrific work, none of which would have seemed quite orthodox to his colleagues, Dax had arrived at the end of theory and the beginning of practical application—at the taking-off point—the countdown.

LYING on the drainboard near the evaporating dish was a hypodermic syringe.

If he were to dissolve the dark brown crystals and inject the solution into his veins, Dax believed that whatever it was that impeded this time-reversal would be neutralized. His consciousness—not his body, his somatic cells—would travel back along the unbroken line of his identity as a germinal continuity. Back to the extent that the effect of the chemical would allow.

He would then be in the body of one of his ancestors. Not spread among them all, but following the line of

greatest genetic valence to one individual: living in the Twelfth Century A. D. Probably, but not certainly, somewhere in England, since most of his ancestors came from there.

Of course the time might be wrong. He had no way of making a precise determination. He had experimented with a rabbit, but after the soft little beast's eyes glazed over in unconsciousness it had immediately come to. The time taken during its visit to the purlieus of its remote and unknown forebears was of no duration in the present. And it had at once attacked him and bitten him savagely.

It seemed curious that an ancestral rabbit at a period not so very far back from a biological point of view should have a spirit so foreign to the rabbits of today. Perhaps the drug had overshot its mark...

What if that were to happen in his case? Wouldn't it perhaps take him to some earlier, non-human form and then, as it were, rebound to the precise moment in history that the strength of the drug indicated? A man is not a rabbit. But suppose he found himself not in the body of a Twelfth Century Englishman—a risky enough situation—but hanging by his tail from a tree in Java? How long before the hypothetical rebound to the time of the Plantagenets?

Howard Dax was too tired to concentrate on the problem: it was probably moonshine. The rabbit had been frightened, not atavistic.

The cumulative effect of overwork and irritation at the boy Mallison and the principal's manner had made him reckless and impatient. He made a sudden decision to stop worrying about precautions and take the plunge... now.

He had plenty of time before the meeting. The trip to the past would have no duration in the present. He measured out an amount of distilled water and stirred the brown crystals into it with a glass rod. Then he filled the hypodermic and went into his bed-sittingroom.

He went to his desk and took a last look at a list of early English irregular verbs and lay down on his sofa, rolling up his sleeve.

He hardly felt the prick of the needle but he realized that the rather painful bump on his forehead had distracted his attention from it.

He looked at the thing he had bumped against. It was wooden and round in section, about as thick as his neck, and rose at a slight deviation from the vertical to a circular platform that was supported at other places by two more wooden uprights. Beyond and above was an immensely lofty roof of dark timbers. Far to the sides were stone walls.

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He looked down to discover that the cold floor under him was also of stone, covered here and there with dry yellowish reeds. Then he saw that he was on all fours.

Instead of hands he had black, furry paws.

II

TRICE, the jester, was getting old. So, he feared, were his jokes.

His joints were stiff and he could no longer do the amusing contortions that used so to entertain the Earl and his little court. In fact, the Earl was getting on, too. He looked as though he was falling asleep in his chair. Next to him the Lady Godwina was mumbling and giggling—not at poor Trice's feeble quips, but as a result of too much blackberry wine mixed with mead. She hiccoughed loudly and the Earl opened his eyes.

He glanced at the Lady Godwina with bored distaste, and then at Trice the jester. Would that the fellow would cease his tedious clowning and go to the kitchens! Yet he hesitated to get rid of him altogether. Having a jester at all in these days was a mark of prestige, and he didn't know where he'd get a replacement.

Now that King Henry was dead he had fortified his castle like the other barons. Since feudal pomp had become the fashion he hung onto

its trappings—poor old Trice was one of them. But, ye gods, what stale jokes! Well, at least they seemed to please the younger serving men, who must be too young to remember them.

Trice was unhappily aware that his humor was missing the mark. He fell back on the one thing that never failed to make them laugh. He swung his bauble and hit himself on the nose. He staggered back with comic terror. "Hold on!" he cried to an imaginary assailant. "Not so hard!" He struck himself again, harder. "Stop! Or I shall appeal to my noble lord for protection!"

The Earl smiled faintly; he didn't want to disappoint the old man. Besides, his nose was bleeding. It really was rather funny. Curious about these people: they had almost no sense of pain. Trice, seeing the smile, hit himself again and again, and feeling the blood, he smeared it over his face in fantastic curlicues. The Earl closed his eyes again, and Trice caught the eye of the clerk, a young man who had come from Normandy. He was sneering. The Lady Godwina was singing a little tune to herself, and paid no attention.

The old jester shrugged, and turned towards the archway to the kitchens and offices. Better have supper and go to bed—his head ached and his nose hurt badly, although the bleeding had stopped.

Next to a wooden stool he caught sight of his cat, Tybalt, staring at him fixedly. Tybalt. His only friend! he thought to himself. But as he passed him, the cat, instead of following him out with tail erect to share the jester's wretched supper, backed cringing under the stool and turned his head as he went by, keeping his staring eyes on him. Most unusual. Very un-catlike.

"Here! Tybalt!" Trice said, but the cat backed further away.

JUST before he realized what had happened to him, Dax recognized that the big wooden thing that loomed over him was a stool.

Maybe it was this realization—and the sight of his own paws—that gave him an idea of his size, and on looking back at the rest of himself he knew that he was a cat. Something had gone wrong. The flashback and subsequent rebound must have taken him far into the dim mammalian past, but for what duration he could not tell. The transition had been unconscious. At least he did not remember it. But to judge by the style of the round stone arches of the hall he was now in—and the stonework looked brand new—the ultimate effect had been according to plan, and this was the early Middle Ages.

A movement caught his eye and he saw it was the cavort-



A, E S O A 3 A 3 A 1

ing of an enormous man, dressed in gigantic tattered motley.

No. He wasn't enormous; it was just the unfamiliar scale of things. The man was saying something in a booming voice, and Dax began to recognize it as a form of transitional early English—but with an admixture of Norman French and some pure Anglo-Saxon phrases. And what an accent! If this man was typical, how wrong modern research and learned speculation were! He would have some interesting things to tell the experts—particularly his tutor—when he got back.

When he got back... That was supposed to be in three days approximately, when the inhibiting effect of the chemical would wear off. Then he would, he hoped, be swept back to his own time and his own body. But he was a cat. This was disastrous! How could he speak to people? He could understand them fairly well, but a cat's bucal cavity and vocal apparatus were not designed for the sounds of human speech.

He decided to try his voice, just on the chance, but stopped, horrified at the muffled yowl that resulted.

Two rangy hounds, six times his size, roused themselves from the rush-covered floor and glared growling at the sound with raised hackles. "Down, Colle! Stop it, Bayard!" a gruff voice command-

ed, and they reluctantly sank back again, keeping their fierce eyes on him. Was this a sample of what he must expect from dogs? He hoped it was merely his abortive attempt at human speech. Any further communication must be tried silently.

He looked around the hall. There were other humans too. Several men-at-arms standing by the walls and a few serving men. At the big trestle-board were seated five people—one of them clearly the lord of the castle—it must be a castle—and the one woman sitting next to him in soiled finery would be his lady. The place reeked with the stale odor of humans and dogs, and less obnoxiously the smell of wood smoke and cooked meat. Dax realized that he now had a feline nose, and made allowances. After all, the well-to-do bathed themselves, in the still existing classic tradition, and would until the Black Death.

The ridiculous giant in motley stopped his capering and came across the stone flags towards him. As he passed with ponderous footsteps he looked down and said, "Here, Tybalt!"

Dax backed under the stool, terrified at the deep, hoarse voice. The man was probably trying to be gentle. He must keep in mind that he had a cat's hearing now, and all sounds would seem lower and louder.

HOW were cats treated in Medieval England? He did not know, and he was not prepared for this contingency. But at least cats as a species had survived. He hoped he was one of the lucky ones. He must at all costs manage to keep alive for three days, because if he were killed before the drug wore off he would not return.

What would they think at the school? Nothing, of course. He would never have been there. That would be changing the future...but you changed the future every time you exerted your free will, anyhow.

One of his experimental rats had not come back: it had merely disappeared with a loud pop. Perhaps an early Colonial terrier had got it. It might be the best thing to do to take to the woods, and wait out the time safe from the unknown dangers of men and dogs—but what of the dangers of the woods? It was winter, to judge by the fire in the hall, on a raised stone platform in the middle of the floor, from which the smoke found its way out through a louver in the high roof. And the icy drafts that came across the floor. Although he was a cat, he had little confidence of being able to hunt like one, or find refuge from the cold and snow.

He decided to follow the court jester. At least the man had spoken to him kindly.

TYBALT

And he had a name: Tybalt. He must remember to answer to it.

He got up and began to walk towards the arched doorway through which the jester had disappeared.

Walking on all fours felt perfectly natural—rather as if he were following himself. There was no trouble about keeping in step, or, rather, just out of it. His mouth was dry and he ran his tongue over his muzzle...he could lick his eye! Then he did something that also felt natural, though pleasantly novel: he waved his tail. Then he stuck out his claws. They clicked against the flagstones and he sheathed them again.

He had never in his life felt so supple and physically complete. He felt like running up the tapestry that hung by the doorway.

At the other end of the vaulted corridor that he found himself in he could see the jester as he went into another chamber that was lit with a smoky reddish glow. There was an increased smell of cookery, and he guessed it was the kitchen.

When he got to the door he could see the jester was being given something in a bowl that steamed, and a large hunk of dark bread. The man turned and came out again and saw him.

"Come along, Tybalt," he said. "Supper for you and me. Come along, old fellow!"

Dax followed him across the corridor to a narrow stone stairway in the thickness of the wall. The winding steps seemed absurdly high. He would far rather have done the whole thing in two or three long leaps, but he took the steps one by one. Feline coordination would come to him in time.

After an almost totally unlit passage they came to a minute room, scarcely more than a cell. The jester struck a light with flint and steel to a tallow candle, and sat down on a low straw-covered bed. The floor was freezing. Dax jumped up onto a small table, but was instantly pushed off it. His instinctive jump up and then down happened so quickly that he only realized in retrospect what a feat it was from a man's point of view. Yet he had landed clumsily. He was not yet quite a cat.

THE jester cut off a piece of dubious-looking meat and threw it onto the floor. "Wait till it cools, Tybalt," he said, and scratched Dax behind the ears. Dax was ravenous, which seemed odd considering he'd had dinner half an hour ago. No, of course not. That was eight centuries in the future; God knew when Tybalt had last eaten. Disregarding the admonition he went at once to the meat, which was pork, and burned his mouth. It smelled

glorious. And yet he suspected that in human form he would have revolted from it.

He looked up at his master. He had a conviction that he belonged to the jester.

He studied the gaunt, blood-smeared face. It looked as if someone had hit him on the nose. The cap-and-bells, with its attached wimple-shaped neck piece, had been laid aside. The gray bobbed hair and bony head looked anything but merry. There was, however, a shrewd reflective expression in the eyes, and Dax felt that he might well be in an advantageous position. Being a jester probably involved a certain amount of tact and discretion, not to mention ingenuity, so he resolved to try to communicate with him.

But first he must eat. Would the damned pork never cool?

The jester was already eating his, in great gulps, alternating it with bits of the evil-looking bread. There was a stoneware pot that smelled strongly of musty ale from which he drank every now and then. The stench of alcohol in it was like spoiled garbage to Dax. How had he ever been able to drink whisky? The thought of it was disgusting. The meat was cool enough now—in fact stone cold—and he tore it to pieces with his pointed teeth and bolted it unchewed. It was marvelous.

"Well, Tybalt?" the jester

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said, putting aside his bowl. "No mice today? We are not very lucky, we two, are we?" He made a snapping with his fingers and Dax jumped up onto the pallet beside him. The old man stroked his back gently, but he had a very strong smell. Dax supposed he would get used to his new keen senses in time. He hoped it would be soon. It was very cold in the jester's cell and he intended to creep close at bed time. In the meanwhile how was he going to make known his true identity? Obviously speech was impossible; and Morse-code tapping with his paw was out of the question.

You wouldn't get very far with mere facial expressions, either. Anyway, to most human eyes a cat has but two: contentment and fear. He looked around wondering if there were any small movable objects that he could arrange into the form of the letters of the alphabet—even a piece of string might do. But he feared that the man couldn't read. Anyway there was no string to be seen.

Then on the table, which was scarcely more than a high bench, he saw a rosary with wooden beads.

He got up and stretched—never in his life had he been able to stretch like this—and jumped delicately over onto the table. The jester reached out and swept him off it. Not roughly, but it was obvious he

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wasn't allowed there. This time his landing was more skillful. He sat on the cold floor and tried to think how he could get hold of the beads. If he had them on the floor he could push them into an arresting shape. A triangle perhaps, or a figure eight, that would catch the jester's eye. He looked up at a movement and saw that the man had picked up a small vellum book and was holding it close to his face. What luck! he could read after all! But how was he going to make letters?

Near the sill of the door were some pieces of straw. He went over and examined them. He realized that a cat's vision is rather poor compared to a man's: quick to notice and interpret motion, but in other respects the over-large pupils, meant for nocturnal hunting, gave an inferior and uncertain image.

THE straw was dirty and smelled of horses, but it ought to do. The trouble was that when his face was close enough to pick it up with his teeth he could scarcely make it out. He couldn't tell at first whether he had one or many in his mouth. He felt that his whiskers should tell him, but he was unaccustomed to their use. He padded over to the jester's feet and dropped the straws. He backed off and looked at them, then with his paw he ineptly pushed them into an A.

He looked up. The jester was lost in his reading.

Dax waited patiently, but the reading went on, and he patted the man's foot with carefully sheathed claws. The jester glanced at him, though not at the crude, straw A, and smiled.

"What now, Tybalt? More supper? That you will have to catch for yourself. See—it's all gone! Share-and-share alike, old friend. I weigh eight stone. You're but a scant four pound, so correspondingly..." He returned to his reading.

Dax went and picked out some more straw which he brought back and attempted to arrange in a B, but gave it up and made an E instead. Then he made two crosses and a triangle.

AEXX△.

It looked like a fraternity. Then he mewed.

The man looked down again with a faint frown. He didn't seem to notice the straw shapes; judging from the way he held the book he was quite short-sighted. "O u t?" he asked. "Out for a rat, poor Tybalt? Or to lie by the embers in the hall?" He shook his head and got up, and went to the door to open it. Dax jumped onto the bed and mewed again. The man paused with his hand on the latch, looking puzzled. Dax jumped down and dabbed with his paw next each letter successively.

"Why, what is this?" the old man said, smiling again. "Playfulness? The kitten is back!" He went to the table and picking up the bauble, made a feint with the stuffed bladder over Dax's head. Dax dodged it irritably and mewed again; three times in quick succession.

This caught the attention of the jester, who laid down the bauble. "Ah! A Tritheist! Will it get you a mouse, Tybalt? Will it keep off evil spirits? It's said the imps love cats—so beware of moonlight and mistletoe!" He picked Dax up and stroked him.

It was infuriating.

Dax was aware that the Medieval mind was very different from the modern, but there must be some meeting point. Too bad this wasn't Friar Roger Bacon—he'd have got his attention in no time. But he was a hundred years too early. His immediate problem was to seek out some person who had enough imagination and curiosity to take notice of a cat who behaved not as a cat. If he had only known this was going to happen!

He tried mewing again, but the jester only smiled, so he mewed once, then twice and then three times. The jester shook his head admiringly. Like most of his contemporaries the world for him was filled with wonders. It was an age of faith, not of speculation.

A pale moon showed through a narrow slit in the wall, which was unglazed, and he became aware that the light from the tallow dip was yellow, and the jester's costume red and green.

So it was all nonsense about cats having no color vision—anyway, hadn't some woman in California disproved that? Against the moon he could see the black outline of full-grown leaves on the nearby trees and knew it was not yet winter but autumn. When winter came in earnest, everyone from scullion to the lord of the manor would bed down in the Great Hall where the fire was. But the stonework of the castle was cold, and he felt himself getting drowsy.

The old jester put down his book, crossed himself and blew out the light. Dax could hear him burrowing into the straw of his bed, and nestled beside him.

III

WHEN he woke it was not quite dark, and a faint gray dawn came into the cell.

The jester was snoring. Somewhere Dax thought he heard a rat. His muscles tensed, and he found himself on his feet by instinct—the idea of a rat was surprisingly attractive and he was hungry again. The noise stopped. He remembered that he had been having a dream—a strange nightmare of chasing after

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Mallison and catching him, and tearing him...with his claws and teeth.

A rusty bell started ringing somewhere in the castle.

The jester snorted, sat up and looked out of the narrow window. Then he lit the candle and said his prayers, kneeling on his bed. Dax stretched, and the old man cleaned his teeth with a splinter and took a draught from the ale pot. It had a sour stench, but Dax found that he no longer minded—there were so many conflicting smells around, the most interesting of which had been the rat. A new, more immediately hopeful one, was of cooking that drifted up from below. It seemed that these people ate meat for their breakfast. And they liked it early.

"Come along, Tybalt," the jester said, putting on his headdress, and went to the door. Dax slipped through quickly so as not to get his tail caught as the jester closed it. They went down the winding stairs again.

At the bottom they came upon another cat—a big red tom—who on catching sight of Dax fluffed his tail and laid back his ears, spitting. Dax had a momentary impulse to see if communication was possible with him, but the big cat yowled and fled down the hallway.

"Ah, Tybalt," the old man said. "Jesters and cats! Even their own kind spits at them!"

As they got to the kitchen Dax saw the two hounds that had growled at him the night before. He was glad that they were now leashed and in the charge of a boy in a short woolen surcoat.

But when they saw Dax the boy was unable to hold them back, and they jerked their leashes from his hand and came running and barking. Dax was terrified. He bolted ahead of them along the vaulted corridor and into the Great Hall, but came face to face with another brace of hounds whose ears pricked up at the sound. Dax without any conscious thought dodged sideways and ran up the tapestry on the wall.

His sharp claws had good foothold on the tough canvas backing. But at the top he almost lost his grip, and scarcely managed to get over onto the musicians' gallery from which the tapestry hung. He crouched there, trembling, while the din below increased. He could hear men shouting at the dogs, and the jester's voice calling him. He mewed loudly for help.

AFTER a while he heard the old man's footsteps on the wooden ladder. He was picked up and comforted, but he was so dizzy with fear that he could hardly see. The jester seemed to think he was calm, and put him on his shoulder and went down the ladder again. The hounds had

been taken away. But Dax stayed where he was with his eyes shut, holding on tight.

"Well, Trice!" Dax opened his eyes and saw the lord of the manor glowering at the jester, and then at him. So Trice was the jester's name. An odd one. The Earl stood with his hands on his hips and seemed irritated rather than angry. "What's this I hear? The cat runs at my hounds and tries to scratch!"

"Oh, no, sir," Trice said. "It was the other way! They ran at him! Tybalt has never scratched!"

"Scratched or no, I wish you'd give him to one of the villagers," the Earl said. "I don't want the hounds upset, and Lady Godwina doesn't like cats. Besides, he'll ruin the tapestry."

"But, my lord, he catches the rats! And he's my... friend."

"The dogs catch the rats," the Earl said shortly. "Give him away."

"Well, my lord, the mice..."

"The red tom gets them."

The old man put up a hand to Dax protectively. "But, noble lord, what would I do without my pet?" Dax glanced at the tired face next his and saw tears in the eyes, but he had a determined look. "If he cannot stay, I...I must go, too!"

The Earl opened his eyes at this, but he smiled. "I see you are loyal, old Trice," he

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said. "I hope you are as loyal to me!"

The Earl turned away. Trice put Dax on the floor and started back towards the kitchens.

"Come, Tybalt," he said. "Or there'll be none left for us."

Dax wished he were still on the shoulder, and stayed close to the jester's feet. Things were not going well at all. It had become as much a problem of survival as of research and communication, but when they got to the kitchen and the hounds were nowhere about, he decided that perhaps the two problems were inter-related. After a meal of scraps he felt more secure. Not seeing his master he went to look for him in the Great Hall.

When he got there he saw that the Earl and his wife and retainers were eating boiled meat. He remembered that his tutor in Middle English had said the main meal in Medieval times was eaten in the morning. The four hounds were squabbling over bones that were thrown to them on the rush-covered flagstones under the trestle-board, and didn't notice him. Trice was not to be seen. After a while the boy in the woolen surcoat was told to take them out. He fastened leashes to their collars and led them through a large doorway in the far wall. Dax looked at the Earl: he had a fairly intelligent face, and he

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had shown forbearance towards Trice, so he thought he would make another try.

The Lady Godwina got up unsteadily from her chair and left the hall—on the way to the lady's solar, Dax guessed; and he padded across to the Earl. When he got to the foot of the high-backed chair—it looked like a detached choir-stall from a gothic church—he patted the Earl's foot.

The Earl looked down at him and frowned.

Dax patted the foot again; three times. Then he mewed three times, and repeated the patting. The Earl blinked and got up, backing away. Dax mewed three times again, and the Earl crossed himself.

"Saints preserve my soul! What have we here?"

DAX turned around three times, getting his hind legs crossed and nearly falling down. "Send for Trice at once!" the Earl shouted. "His cat Tybalt has a fit! Careful!" he said to a serving man who had come forward with outstretched hands. "Take care you are not bitten! He is unclean!"

Dax backed away and ran to the open door, and out.

There was a brilliant sun and he could see nothing at first—and when he did it was blurred, owing to the vertical shape of his contracted pupils. It was much warmer than the night before, and the leaves were brown on the trees.

There was no courtyard and gateway, with drawbridge and moat beyond, as he had rather expected. Instead he was on cobblestones, surrounded at intervals by small houses, with trees between them. The village was built against the castle, somewhat in the French manner, but the houses were wretched affairs of mud-daubed reeds on wooden framing: hardly better than hovels. Only a few had more than one story. Smoke was coming up from every chimney, and the men were evidently on their way to work in the fields. They carried crude-looking farm implements and were dressed in coarse homespun with their legs padded and cross-gartered. They were a sorry lot: blank-faced and half starved.

Dax heard footsteps behind him and turned.

A young man with blond short hair and a Norman nose had come out of the doorway. He looked at Dax with amused curiosity, and squatted down, putting out a hand. At this proximity his eyes showed bloodshot and there was a beery smell. He said something that Dax could not understand—it sounded vaguely like a kind of French, but Dax had not studied medieval Norman. Still, it had a kindly sound. Dax rubbed against the hand. This man, at least, did not share the Earl's diagnosis. What was his position in the Earl's household? Not his son

—he looked too unlike him. Would he be his clerk? He had a clerkly look—what is it in a face that makes it seem scholarly? And his hands were more fit for holding a pen than a mattock or a sword.

Well, give it another try.

Dax wished he could make an ingratiating sound, and found he was purring. He looked around for something he could use as a signal; mew-ing and tapping seemed to be misunderstood. A few yards away the cobblestones gave place to dirt, and he started towards it. It might do for a blackboard. He looked back, but the clerk had not moved.

Dax wondered how a cat might beckon, lacking a forefinger. He waited until he caught the young man's eye, and tried to beckon with his head but it had no results. He continued on to the patch of dirt and scratched a triangle, and to his relief the clerk got up and came to him. When he was standing over him, Dax scratched two words in Latin: *homo sum*, and looked up.

The clerk was staring with his mouth open.

GOOD, thought Dax: Latin was the *lingua Franca* of medieval Europe, and went on with his scratching. *Humani nihil a me alienum*—

There was a gasp and he looked up again. The young man had closed his eyes and had the back of his hand against his forehead. He

by Stephen Barr

turned and walked to the castle door, holding his head. Dax sat down in disgust. A Twelfth Century hangover, indeed! A shadow fell across him and he turned.

Three villagers: two men, and a woman in a hood were behind him. They had an expectant air, and, realizing that they were doubtless illiterate, he drew a large five-pointed star.

The effect on them was volcanic.

The woman screeched and threw her skirt over her head. The men crossed themselves and one of them turned and ran. The other slashed at Dax with a bill-hook and then, shouting, "Bewitched! Bewitched!" he, too, ran. The bill-hook missed Dax, thanks to his instinctive leap to one side, but the woman continued her noise and more people came out of the cottages, armed with farming implements and sticks. Everyone was shouting and offering advice. The main thread of their discourse was: Possessed! Possessed! Kill it! The Devil Incarnate!

Dax was hemmed in on three sides. He started back for the castle, but the big doorway was filled with on-lookers, one of whom stepped forward, aiming a crossbow. There was a clank followed by a hissing in the air, and the bolt thumped into the ground next to him. The bowman cursed and began to wind

TYBALT

up his bow with a crannikin. Dax's fur stood out all over him and he made a mad dash towards a group of women who had nothing in their hands but besoms of birch twigs. It was a fortunate choice.

Two or three women made abortive swats at him and the others backed away, leaving a clear path. In front of him was an open space and a tall tree..

Almost before he knew it he was near its top and the whole village was milling around near its base, looking up with red angry faces.

"Fire the tree!" someone shouted.

"T'won't burn. It's an elm!"

"Well, *I* shan't climb it!"

"I won't have my tree burn!" an indignant voice yelled, but was drowned out. Small children were jumping up and down in excitement, and some teen-age boys threw stones but none of them reached him. Dax spat furiously. Teen-agers were the same through the ages!

"Cut it down, then!"

"T'will fall on my house!" (A woman's voice.)

The shouting died down, and Dax hung on till his claws ached. There seemed to be a conference going on. The castle appeared to have lost interest, which relieved him; if there was to be any more crossbow shooting he stood little chance. After a short while the subject of the con-

ference became apparent as men began arriving with bundles of dry sticks and faggots.

To Dax's horror these were piled about the trunk and set alight. Then, as the flames began to rise, green boughs were added and a thick cloud of suffocating smoke came up.

DESPERATELY he tried to find escape. One of the elm's long branches reached out almost over the roof of one of the houses, but it meant climbing down into the heart of the choking cloud. Beyond the house he suddenly caught sight of his master, Trice, who waved to him beseechingly. It gave him courage. Holding his breath, he began to back down the trunk until he felt the branch under him. Then he twisted round and ran along it with his heart pounding. A cat has small lungs for its size and holding his breath was a torment—but at last he was free of the smoke, and he took a breath of clean air.

The roof seemed to be within reach, and the crowd had temporarily lost sight of him in the smoke.

He could hear the jester's voice, but for some reason he couldn't understand him—it sounded like gibberish. He crept out until the thinning branch began to bend and, just as shouts went up from the more observant villagers, he leapt.

He landed on the thatch—

and almost lost his hold, but he was just able to scramble to the rooftree, and ran along the ridge. There was more shouting. Either these ones spoke a dialect or the excitement had put Middle English out of his head: he could barely understand them. Something about Widow Aelthreda's cottage—something about a witch...

He slithered down the far side of the thatching and landed on a window box of late purple daisies. The parchment-covered window next him was open and he slipped inside just as the crowd turned the corner.

He found himself in a small, bare upstairs room, insufficiently lit by the single window, but he could easily see into the most profound shadows. Under a chest in the corner was a mouse, frozen with terror. Dax was still out of breath, but he crept toward it, and as it ran out along the baseboard he intercepted it. He ate it—all.

As he washed his face he wondered with diminishing nervousness what all the shouting and noise outside meant.

In a little while he heard footsteps and a woman came into the room. When she saw him she made some noises with her mouth, and Dax ran to her. She picked him up and began to stroke him very pleasantly. Then there were more noises from below and

by Stephen Barr

presently there were a lot of people in the room. The woman dropped him for some reason.

He ran under a big, low wooden thing, but a big iron thing was pushed at him. It had a sharp point, and he had to come out. This time the man with the bill-hook did not miss, but the pain lasted only for an instant.

And...and...he was more conscious of the sound made by the hypodermic as it fell on the floor and broke.

He looked at it with annoyance, and felt the slight prick on his arm. He got up and went to his bathroom, where he dabbed it with antiseptic. He saw that he'd better shave before going to the meeting. Well, the drug hadn't worked. What a waste of time. What a pity.

Perhaps a larger dose? He must experiment some more.

He started shaving.

IV

WHEN he got to the principal's office—a little late, which was not entirely by accident—he found that Mallison and a few of his fellow-students were sitting opposite the desk in hard chairs.

The principal behind it gave Dax a reprimanding look, and then one at his watch. On one side of him were a group of teachers and a member of the school board who Dax remembered was Mr. TYBALT

Lightstone's especial crony. On the other were Mrs. Lightstone—a dour but subservient partner to her husband—and an empty chair.

The principal pointed to the chair and said, "We have been waiting for your arrival to begin, Mr. Dax." He turned to Mallison as Dax sat down, and said, "You are, I believe, what is known as a 'hep-cat'?" He waited but Mallison said nothing. His face was very white and he looked sullen. "Well, answer me, sir!" the principal said loudly.

"You didn't ask me anything," the boy said in a low voice. "You told me."

The principal pushed his lips out and breathed deeply. He took something from his pocket and held it up. Dax saw it was the packet of alleged heroin.

"Did you throw this out of the window of Mr. Dax's classroom?"

The boy looked at it incomprehendingly and shook his head.

"Do you know what it is? Have you seen this packet before?"

"No, Mr. Lightstone..."

"You sound uncertain. Think carefully, Mallison." The principal put the packet on his desk and unfolded it. Everyone bent forward and looked at it—including Mallison, who shook his head again.

Dax leaned across Mrs. Lightstone and whispered to

her husband, "Did you have it analyzed?"

The principal shook his head impatiently. "Not yet! There was no one in the Chemistry Department!" He cleared his throat importantly. "Well? What have you to say?"

Mallison apparently had nothing to say. He swallowed and looked at one of the boys next him. Mr. Lightstone leaned back in his chair and turned to address the group on his right—the school board man in particular. "This," he said, tapping the packet, "was thrown out of a window of the physics class room today. These are the boys that sit next those windows. I have every reason to suspect Mallison."

The group nodded. Dax realized that they had been briefed in advance. The boy Mallison had certainly a sulky and uncooperative air. He seemed the epitome of juvenile delinquency on the defensive, and yet...

"**YOU,**" the principal said to the boys, "are a little band of trouble-makers. You cut classes, you stay up late and go to what I believe you call juke-joints. I have heard reports of your riding in hot-rods!" He paused significantly.

"None of us here's got a car," Mallison said in a flat voice. He was definitely sneering now. "I've never

even seen a real drag-race!"

Mr. Lightstone blinked. The word was unfamiliar to him, but it had a disreputable ring to it. "And I suppose you've never taken narcotics?"

There was a dead silence. Mallison clamped his mouth shut, and his face became wooden.

Mr. Lightstone addressed the boy next him. "Have you ever seen any of the boys use this?" He tapped the packet again. "Did you see Mallison throw it out of the window? You sit behind him!"

The boy looked blank and glanced at Mallison. "No, sir," he said.

"But you couldn't have missed seeing him!"

"Excuse me a minute," Dax said. "These boys aren't a *band* exactly. They just happen to sit next the windows."

Mr. Lightstone looked offended but resourceful. "They picked those seats themselves. That's what a clique does. It—"

"I assign all the pupils to their desks," Dax said, and felt he was turning pink.

The principal took this in his stride by ignoring it. "And you," he said to the boy on Mallison's other side. "What have you to say?"

The boy frowned and stuttered.

Dax was beginning to feel annoyed although he didn't know exactly why. For one thing, he had let himself seem to be defending Mallison. It

by Stephen Barr

was his craze for accuracy, of course. "I don't understand why the parents of these boys aren't here," he was surprised to hear himself say. "It seems to me they ought to have some kind of defense counsel if there is going to be a trial."

The principal looked at him steadily. "Would you care to act in that capacity?"

Dax felt that he was getting redder than ever. "Have you had a doctor examine Mallison for...for the effects of narcotics?" he said. "Where are these policemen you said you spoke to? Shouldn't they be informed of your suspicions, instead of holding a kind of star chamber inquisition? It's...it's *medieval!*"

Mr. Lightstone glared at him in astonishment.

Dax had a sudden thought. "The chemistry lab is right over my class room," he said. "Why couldn't the packet have fallen from there?"

"What would *they* be doing with heroin?"

"But we don't know yet that—"

The principal interrupted him and swept his arm in a gesture of all-inclusive condemnation. "We will in good time! But if you have never seen guilt before, you see it now!" He looked at the startled young faces with abhorrence. "Look at them!"

DAX had a curious and violent revulsion, although he hadn't followed the line of
TYBALT

reasoning in Lightstone's last remark. In fact, he realized that he hadn't really heard the words. But the principal's angry face made his hackles rise.

The principal had a menacing look. He was the most dangerous looking thing he had ever seen. A convulsive shudder went through all of Dax's muscles, and he leapt—straight across Mrs. Lightstone's lap, who fell over backwards, screaming. Everyone was making loud, garbled noises, and he was on top of Lightstone, scratching and biting.

He heard himself give a loud, warlike and triumphant yowl.
END

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when the principal witness is the corpse!



THE HAPPY ←

HOMICIDE

BY FRANK BANTA



ATTENDANTS pushing an ambulance cot wheeled what was left of murdered Fannie Bork into the center of the courtroom. The body was covered with a white sheet, except for the long, slim feet which were sticking out. Her toenails were painted red.

Forty-year-old John Bork listened while the prosecutor read the indictment against him: “—and the same John Bork did on the twelfth day of March, 1986, fire a pistol at his wife, having then and there a long preconceived desire to kill her, and then and there did achieve his felonious intent, and did murder the same Fannie Bork.”

“John Bork, you have heard

the indictment,” stated the judge formally. “How do you wish to plead: Not guilty, no contest, or wait and see?”

“I’ll wait and see, your honor.”

“I thought you would,” sighed the judge. “We haven’t had a straight not-guilty plea in ages. Proceed, Mr. Prosecutor.”

“Roll in the Very Complicated Monstrous Proximilator machine,” commanded the prosecutor. Two burly laborers, panting, rolled the machine on its creaky casters across the court room floor to Fannie’s head. The machine was six feet tall, three feet wide, and twelve inches deep; on its face were forty-three meters and an on/off switch.

The laborers plugged the machine's line cord into an outlet and got out of the way.

THE prosecutor flipped the switch from off to on. Then he folded his arms and waited until all the forty-three meters ceased their dancing and went back to zero. That done, he turned to the jury.

"In this machine rests the proof of the crime charged against the defendant," he said dramatically, patting the smooth gray side of the machine. "This machine will tell you *all* you need to know about the murder. Oh, to be sure, I shall show you the corpus delicti presently; but *why* and *how* this crime was committed shall be revealed only by this machine's stimulation of the deceased's brain. *She will herself relate who her killer was!*"

There was a shocked gasp from the jurors and the spectators in the court room when the prosecutor pulled back the sheet from the body, uncovering her head and chest. "The jury will note that the government has removed her skull down to her eyebrows so that we could contact her brain's recordings with the machine's probe. The jury will also note the four bullet holes in the deceased's chest, which we intend to prove were put there by John Bork."

"I missed twice," said John Bork, nodding.

"Silence!" shouted the suddenly enraged judge. "This court depends entirely on the Very Complicated Monstrous Proximilator machine for its evidence." He turned to the jury, still seething. "The jury will completely disregard the defendant's utterly uncalled-for admission. Proceed, Mr. Prosecutor."

The prosecutor fastened the ground cable of the machine to Fannie's big toe by means of an immense alligator clamp. Then taking the bulbous radio-frequency probe in his hand he said portentously, "Now we shall search for the memory-recording of Fannie Bork's moment of death!"

He touched her brain lightly with the probe.

Those seeing it for the first time were chilled by the dead body's sudden animation.

"Oh, Winston!" cooed dead Fannie Bork, her arms raising from the cot to embrace an invisible something. She kissed. "You tastes good!"

The prosecutor moved the probe.

"George?" called Fannie, her slim arms searching at the side of her cot. "I didn't hear you leave, George." She relaxed. "Oh, I hope he found his shoes."

"He didn't though," contributed John Bork.

The prosecutor moved the probe, hurrying on by emotion-stirred quavers: Angelo, Moose, Maudie, Deacon and Quasimodo.

"Speed, darlin', what's your hurry?" asked Fannie in her plaintive, metallic voice as she held out her hands beseechingly.

"I never got to know him very well," interjected John Bork. "His visits were all so short."

The prosecutor moved his probe.

"Bork! Bork!"

"Ah," said the prosecutor. "Now we are getting down to cases. I shall try that spot again."

"Bork! Bork!"

"She's not calling for me," advised Bork. "She just had a cold that week."

THE prosecutor moved his probe. At each touch, the body broke into quaking action: Ferdinand, Frenchy, Yacob; Peyton, Rebel, Young foo Yum; and John.

"Ah!" said the prosecutor. "Here we are now."

"John!" whispered Fannie. "John, John, John! Oh, Johnny Johnson, my love! Stay here forever!"

"Wife's other John," said John Bork succinctly.

The prosecutor moved his probe: Sinclair, Henrik, Sitting Duck, Oscar, Kenny, and Aqueduct.

"That Aqueduct is Sitting Duck's educated brother," confided John Bork. "Before he went to Princeton his name was Wet Duck."

The prosecutor moved his probe: Pease, Reese and

Meese, Acuff, Eyolf and Beowulf; Bork! Bork!

"That cough again?" muttered the prosecutor, ready to move on.

"No, she's calling for me that time," corrected Bork.

"How can you tell?"

"It has more of a snarl in it than her cough has."

The prosecutor tried the spot once more.

"Bork! Bork! Why are you pointing that at me, Bork? What are you going to do, Bork?" She held out her hands to ward him off. "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!" Then she dropped her hands.

"I missed twice," John said, nodding.

"The defendant will keep his lousy confessions to himself!" shrieked the judge. "I will not have the importance of our Very Complicated Monstrous Proximilator machine vitiated by these unwanted confessions!"

Bork shrugged. "I just wanted to clear up a couple of details, your honor. I just like to be tidy."

"We don't need your help," responded the judge crushingly. "The Very Complicated Monstrous Proximilator machine tells us *all* we want to know." He turned to the prosecutor. "You may proceed."

"The state rests."

BORK'S lawyer advised the court that no defense would be presented. The

prosecutor exhorted the jury that its duty was plain. The judge gave final instructions, and the jury filed out. It returned in four minutes.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict in such a gratifyingly short space of time?" the judge asked, beaming.

The foreman arose. "We have, your honor."

"Just for the record, what is your verdict?" twinkled the judge.

"Not guilty, your honor."

The prosecutor jumped up. "Why, that can't be!" he shouted. "It's a *prima facie* case, unrefuted and therefore patent. What else do you need?"

"Yeah!" agreed the judge, outraged.

"We need some plain, old-fashioned evidence of a crime," answered the jurymen, unperturbed.

"Old-fashioned?" The fuming prosecutor rejected the heresy, pushing it away from him with both hands. "This is all unscientific now," he warned. "The Very Complicated Monstrous Proximilator machine—especially the new model with the forty-three

meters which replaces the old thirty-nine meter machine—is the *ne plus ultra* of justice!"

"Oh, no, it isn't," dissented the foreman. "Did your evidence place the deadly weapon in the defendant's hand? Did your evidence even tend to show the holes in the woman's chest were *made* by a gun? She said nothing about a weapon, if you will recall. She merely said, 'Why are you pointing that at me, Bork? What are you going to do, Eork?'"

"But he had plenty of motive," pleaded the prosecutor.

"Oh, we'll go along with that," assented the foreman.

"And the defendant admitted it!" pursued the prosecutor triumphantly.

The foreman shook his head. "Admissions don't count. The judge said so himself."

"So even though you know he's guilty," the prosecutor said hollowly, "you're going to let him go?"

"That's right," agreed the foreman happily, and cleared his throat. "We, the jury," he pronounced, "find this fellow innocent of what he did!"

END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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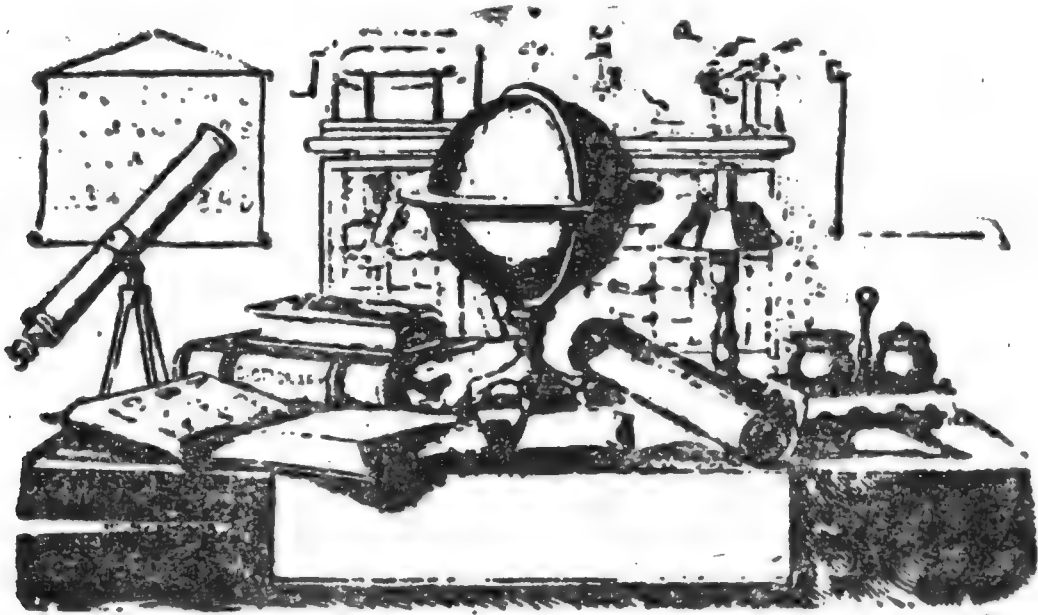
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THE HAPPY HOMICIDE



science briefs

SPEAKING of the weather, which of course someone just was or shortly will (and by the way, it was *not* Mark Twain who said "...but nobody does anything about it") here are a couple of things you are quite sure of that just ain't so: First, that rainfall is caused exclusively by the shifts in highs and lows and all the other things the pretty girls on TV tell you about. The Australian physicist Edward G. Bowen got the idea that maybe space dust filtering down can seed clouds the way man does occasionally with silver iodide. Chasing his guess, he went over all the records he could get his hands on, and sure enough found that the entire Earth has al-

most simultaneous peaks of precipitation at certain times—and in more cases than coincidence could arrange, these times were almost exactly 30 days after the Earth had passed through known meteor swarms. Second: We all know that the Earth is warming up, very probably due to the "greenhouse effect" caused by us and our factories, exhaling vast amounts of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Well, in a symposium in Rome recently, Climatologist J. Murray Mitchell announced his conclusion that the climate ended a warming period some 20 years ago and is now cooling again. The mean temperature over 80% of the earth has gone down, in that time, half a degree Fahr-

enheit. The U.S., Western Europe and the Pacific coast of Asia are the exceptions.

Isoniazid, the miraculous conqueror of TB, can prevent as well as cure the disease. Plans are afoot to try it in certain high-incidence areas. If it works, a condition may be reached in which the bacillus, wherever it exists, will simply have nowhere to go, and the disease will cease to exist. Already TB, once the No. 1 killer, is down to fourteenth.

A resounding salute to Mr. Clearborn Parker of Ft. Worth. Suffering from a condition known as hemochromatosis, Mr. Parker had to submit to a long series of phlebotomies—the bit-by-bit withdrawal of his blood. He may need up to a hundred of these. His doctors (at the Carter Blood Center in Ft. Worth) discovered that Mr. Parker was a walking treasure-house: his blood contained a rare serum which can be used to do Rh blood typing. He has this serum, called anti-D, due to having been given the wrong blood in a transfusion some years ago. The doctors told him that if he would submit to small transfusion of more of this “wrong” blood, his output of anti-D would be much increased, but that it could be unpleasant, even dangerous, and, possibly, deadly. The 51-year-old Parker just grinned and told them to go ahead. Be-

cause of this, it is estimated that he will produce enough anti-D to do 8 million Rh blood-clumping tests. And he refused to take any pay. All we can say is—thanks.

Electrical storms seem to affect mental patients. During a period of frequent atmospheric electrical disturbance, admissions to mental hospitals increase, and the patients are more difficult to deal with. The exact function of electrical currents in the nervous system has yet to be completely understood. It is known, however, that there is a normal fluctuation of small dc voltages in the body, fluctuations which increase very noticeably in the mentally ill.

In a recent statement, James E. Webb, administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, listed four good reasons why the U. S. should press ahead into space. 1. We cannot tolerate any gap between our space technology and that of the Russians, as it is possible for the leading nation to reach a degree of advance which would make it uncatchable: it would make too many further gains by virtue of its superior equipment and skills. 2. Space research has the virtue of cutting across many different scientific disciplines, causing a massive cross-pollination from which everyone benefits. 3. We must hurry ahead for

reasons of prestige. This is not merely an emotional, or even a political matter. In the forefront, we are in a much better position to give and get information from all nations, large and small. 4. Satellite technology promises early and heavy cash returns through its immense impact on the communications industry and weather forecasting.

Another of sf's old-timers, the space station, will come true. Project Apollo, the manned, soft-landing moon shot, would require a monstrous multi-stage liquid-fuel rocket standing nearly 400 feet tall, and would have to supply 12,000,000 lbs. of thrust at takeoff. Alternatively, a Nova rocket carrying the Apollo capsule would be boosted by a cluster of 8 F-1 engines, a million and a half pounds of thrust each; or a dozen solid-fuel boosters totalling 20 million lbs. of push. It looks very much as if these plans will be dropped in favor of an advanced Saturn which will carry fuel up and put it in orbit. The Nova will then rendezvous with it, refuel, and head for the moon.

Enter Aquaculture, which is neither farming nor fishing but something in between. Dean Charles J. Fish of the School of Oceanography in Rhode Island is making exhaustive study of salt ponds—seaside ponds cut off from

the ocean by sand-bars and other such slight barriers. For a long time regarded as useless except for garbage dumps, these ponds turn out to be very important and filled with potentials. Dr. Fish points out that Narragansett Bay gives several times the yield of seafood than can be taken from the neighboring bay, Buzzard's on Cape Cod. The reason, he says, is the great number of salt ponds around the Narragansett beaches. They act as nurseries for vegetable and animal life on which fish feed. A quarter-million dollars from the National Institute of Health finances the pond study, which may result in a new industry, the "farming" of shallow water, and a great new source of food.

Amherst's Prof. J. W. Davenport has completed an "all-purpose" psychology lab, consisting of a central control room and sixteen private cubicles each of which is large enough for two students and a patient or animal subject. An instructor can survey the entire proceedings one by one or all at once, by closed-circuit TV; or he can share the experiment in any one room with all the others. Prof. Davenport designed the facility and built it with students on a do-it-yourself basis. The result is \$6500 worth of materials turned into a \$40,000 lab. That, friend, is using psychology! END

You too can cause earthquakes, munch
high-tension power lines and travel faster
than light—all you have to do is become an

E / being

BY JAMES STAMERS

ILLUSTRATED BY THALL

FIRST man to reach the speed of light, I was. But you'll find the good Albert only hinted at the effects, in a delta-theta 2.3 pi-squared way. $E=mc^2$, he said. And for fifty years before they built my rocket, the *Lighttrick*, slim, tapering, sleek and gyperpowered, everyone concentrated on turning matter into energy at a light-squared power. Big, bright bangs, and congratulations.

It's a pity no one asked what happens to energy *divided* by the speed of light. I happen to be the answer to the equation, and by interfering with the motor of this electric typescriber I can give you my thoughts on the matter.

The *Lighttrick* hit full velocity out there between Van Allen and the asteroids.

I'd guess the whole beautiful ship, including me, converted into energy and, slowing down, reconverted on the wrong side, so to speak. And there I was, floating without a ship and surrounded by little round beings, shimmering in a blue haze.

"Good afternoon," I said.

But no sound came out of my mouth. I had a mouth, in a way, but not for talking; and not at all the sort of mouth I used to have. In fact, the shimmering blue haze was me. I could find no other parts of me. And when the little round things touched me on the periphery, there was an intelligent vibration.

"Frequency and tone?" said the vibration. "Please identify."

"You must take me as you find me," I thought.

"Unidentified frequencies and discordant tones requested not to wander in space-ways," vibrated the little round things.

"I'm a man," I vibrated back. "We don't have frequencies. We use frequencies in radio, television, radar and so on."

"Not intelligible."

"Where's my ship?"

"Ship?"

I tried to picture the *Light-trick* and the long thin gleam on her hull, the fury of her rockets and the calm ordered keyboard of the control panels.

"Most interesting," vibrated the round things. "Poetic. Very creative. Speculative philosopher, yes?"

THEY seemed to be grasping the general idea, so I concentrated on an image of myself, square and bearded, staring sternly into space through the ports, in a pioneer manner, observing hitherto unknown planets.

"Most ingenious," my audience vibrated back. "But unlikely."

Then they started vibrating among themselves.

"Senior e minus says..."

"Mush is mush, that's what I say."

"Now, theoretically..."

"I don't vibrate why not. There are more things in positive and negative, Horatio, than..."

"Excuse me," I vibrated.

There was a brief pause.

"Perhaps we should illuminate."

"Please do," I vibrated politely.

They gathered round the edges of my haze and explained. It seemed a very senior e had suggested once that there might, just might, theoretically be side-effects of mush. The little round things were e beings. And "mush" was the accepted term for the static and orbital tracks of electrons in fixed patterns, such as one found here and there in space. But the very senior e, apparently, had speculated that in a certain narrow band of light frequencies mush might possibly give an appearance of "matter"—to coin a word—a kind of condensed or crystalline energy.

"But no one," they vibrated, "ever suggested there might be forms of life based on such 'material' structures. We admire your imagination. Hail bright e! All hail."

A rapid circuit of my haze failed to show anyone else that they might be vibrating to.

"Do you mean me?" I inquired.

"Naturally. Hail, bright e!"

"I'm an e?"

"What else?"

"Very well," I thought. "Perhaps you'll tell me what an e is."

"An e? We are all e beings."

"So you mentioned earlier. But what is an e being?"

"Ah, you are too deep for

us. Highly original philosopher, yes. But please get off the spaceway. There is a food flood due."

And they edged me firmly down, and down, to a vast doughnut with a hole in the center.

I ate a piece out of habit. It was insipid and tasteless. But then, a doughnut several thousand miles across must have some drawbacks.

"The pasture is better inside," they vibrated.

So I sank down into the enormous piece of pastry and came out of a couple of inner layers to see a big ball of mush. There was no mistaking it. A vast, tangled, inter-connecting mass of tiny points of light. Mush was a good name for it. But here and there on its surface were great rivers of liquor and mounds of food in delectable variety.

I stuffed myself for days, browsing here and there across the surface of the globe of mush.

In fact, I was chewing quietly on an apparently endless streaming ribbon of—well—trout, steak, caviar, you-name-your-favorite food; that's what it was to me. And I happened to bite too deeply. There was a core of this mush stuff inside and, when I bit it, the whole food supply stopped. The stream of entrancing food just disappeared.

And there I was, hovering on a plain of bare mush.

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I was brooding on this and belching contentedly with a sort of cracking noise, when the skeleton came driving over the surface of the mush ball. It was in a framework of mush shaped like a jeep but squirting delicious little fountains of liquor in the front, where the engine of a real jeep would have been. I moved over and tasted them. And the whole framework stopped.

"Triple purple hell," said a voice. "The damned thing's broken down again. Wait till I get my hands on that idiot mechanic!"

"Hey," I vibrated. "Where are you?"

"Now I'll have to walk all the way back, I suppose," the voice added.

The skeleton got out of the mush jeep, walked through me and lifted the hood.

"Battery flat," the voice said disgustedly. "Not a drop of juice in it."

I began to feel guilty.

There was a slight blue haze round the skeleton's head. When I examined it more closely, it looked less like a skeleton of bare bones and more like a physician's chart of the human nervous system, traced out in thin lines of m u s h . . . little close-packed lines of energy, fixed in relation to each other but flexible as a whole.

It occurred to me I was looking at a human being, in terms of energy.

And I had just drunk his jeep's ignition!

So thought was a form of energy, after all. For some of the things he was thinking about the mechanic responsible for maintaining the jeep were strictly subliminal and Freudian. If he spoke, I doubted if I would hear him. His voice would just be a very faint wave of mush traveling indistinctly out.

"And the next time that spark-spark foreman sends me out on an emergency power-line repair," continued the skeleton, "he can spark-spark well give me a vehicle that works!"

The skeleton's name was Joe, I think. And I watched Joe sway over to the ribbon of mush I had bitten through.

"Fused," Joe muttered in his head. "Now, what on Earth did that?"

And it struck me for the first time where I was. Back on Earth! As an e being! A being based, it seemed, on energy and not on matter. Converted accidentally by the marvels of modern science and the supreme technological achievement of traveling at the speed of light.

I spat disgustedly at the thought.

"Summer lightning?" Joe bent his mush head back and looked up. He exposed a rather interesting tidbit in the region of his throat plexus and his cardiac nerves were, I regret to say, for an instant very

appetizing. But I controlled myself.

After all, in a technological society as free with energy as ours...as yours...there were bound to be ample food and drink flowing about.

I swear I had come to that ethical conclusion. It wasn't my fault that I was unfamiliar with my own reactions as an e being. I didn't know I was so fast. I ate Joe by mistake. I just drained off the energy of his system before I knew it. Truly.

WELL, naturally I was sorry about it. In fact, I was just standing there, looking at the huddled pile of mush, when the other repair crew arrived. From their scrambled thoughts of death and radio and Main Office, I gathered they were sending for a doctor. Sure enough, he arrived in an autojet with delicious after-burners.

So then they had to send for a team of towing tractors. I just couldn't help thinking about the ignition systems of their vehicles; and to think is to eat, with an e. Or rather, if you have the speed of light—as an e being has—it takes some time before you learn to control your reactions quickly enough.

"Well, I don't know what's going on around here," said a voice which I located as the doctor thinking to himself. "But I remember Professor Bigglesby's advice. When you

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don't know, nod thoughtfully."

I could see his mush head and its blue haze wobbling solemnly at the other mush-men. I beg your pardon—at the other humans.

"Nervous collapse," the doctor continued in his head. "Something to do with electricity, I suppose. Powerline failure. Broken cable. Dead repair man. Don't know much about electricity. Who does? Hello, hello, what's this?"

I saw him bend his nervous skeleton over Joe's body and straighten up with a string of little silver heads sticking to his hand.

"Makes a noise. Quite musical. Adheres to skin. Light. What is it?"

"There's some more of that stuff in the jeep engine," one of the repair crew noticed.

"And on the doc's jets..."

"And in our truck..."

I watched and gathered I was leaving some form of conversion product around the place. I didn't like that thought. If an e being eats energy as food and drink, what does an e being's conversion product make? The answer might be important...considering I had just eaten someone.

I decided to follow along. The doctor was wiping the silver beads off his hands into something shaped like a glass jar and screwing on a lid. I thought I had better be around when it was examined.

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So I rolled after the towing tractors and carefully refrained from even thinking of their refreshing little spark-plugs and tasty exhaust.

I followed the doctor until we reached a place where the mush grew up in blocks on either side, square and close-meshed, with streams, rivers and trickling lines of energy tumbling through their structures. I gathered we had reached a city of some sort.

The doctor-skeleton got out of the tractor and went into one of the tall blocks of mush through a hole. I followed, nibbling a light bulb or two as we passed down the long corridor inside. The doctor, still carrying the jar shape, stopped once or twice and looked back, then he shot in through a doorway on the left.

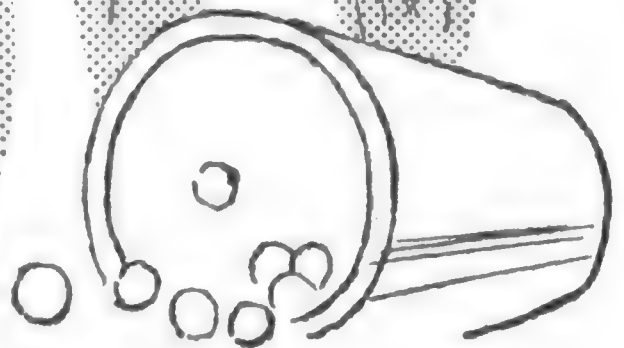
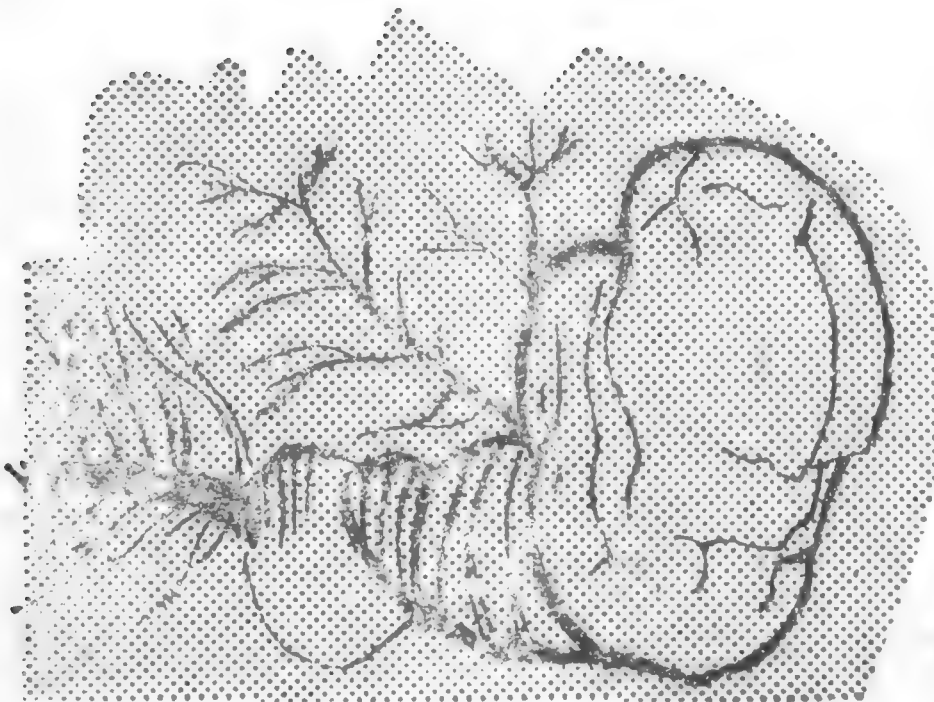
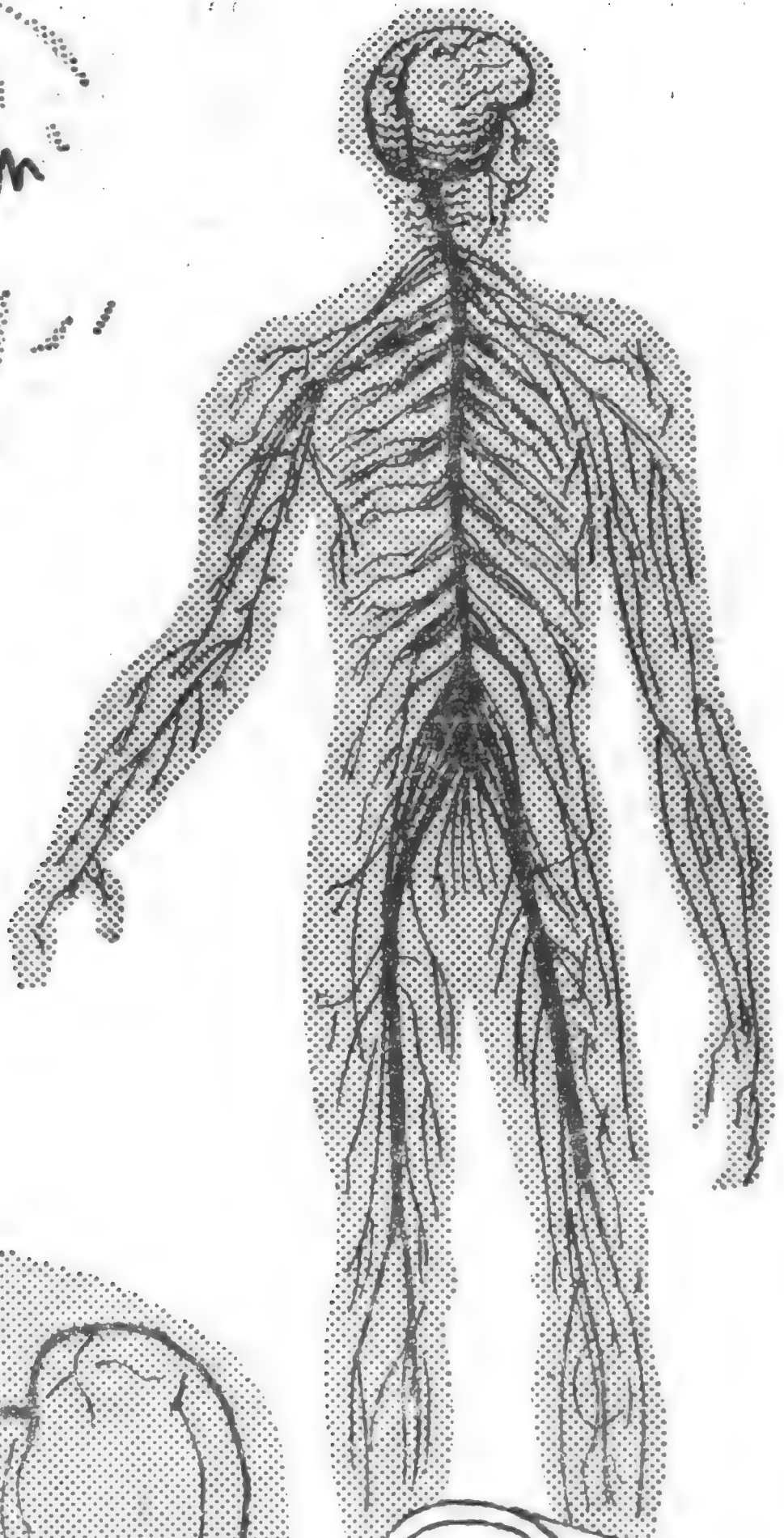
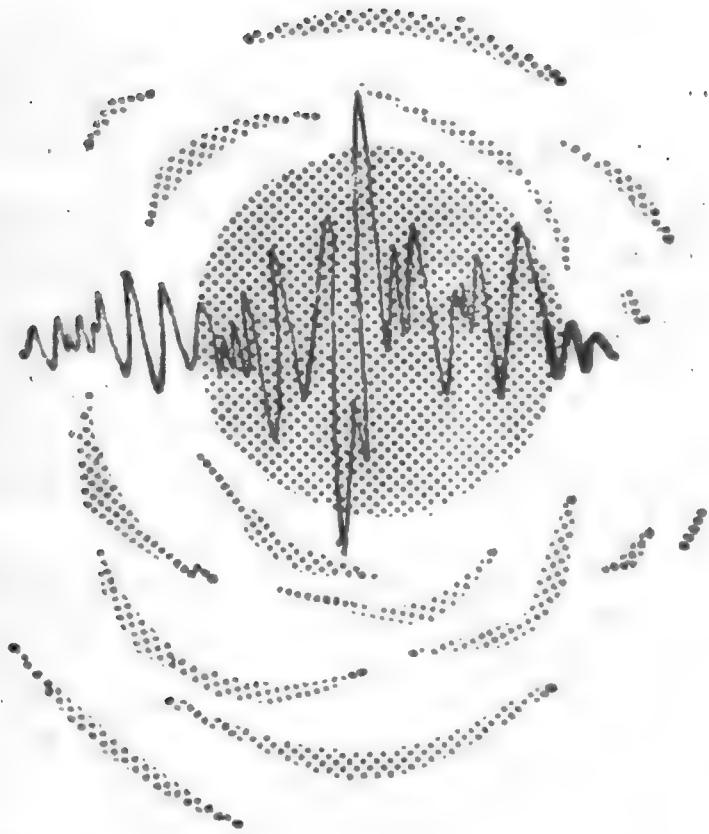
"Dr. McPherson," thought a thin skeleton by the window.

"I don't want to say it," said the doctor's mush head, "but this jar of muck seems to have put the corridor lights out."

He held out the jar and I saw a faint wave of mush spreading from his mouth toward the thin skeleton. When the mush wave reached him, the thin man jerked in plain disbelief.

"If I heard that straight, either Doc McPherson is drunk or he's got something very interesting. I wonder which."

The thin man wandered



casually over to the jar the doctor was holding and took it.

"Not drunk," he considered, holding the jar up in the air. "But..."

And then his thoughts ran riot in a stream of edibles. He was thinking of electronics, protons, ions, electrons, gamma, delta and alpha particles, and I couldn't resist it. I'm sorry. I just had to eat him, his thoughts were so delicious.

Doctor McPherson stared down at the thin body on the floor and walked out of the room. He left the jar where it had rolled on the floor of mush.

I was quite happy. It must have been a laboratory of some sort. There were refreshing sources all over the room.

I was still tasting and testing here and there when the doctor returned with another pair of mush-men—humans, I mean—and they had a long conversation in their heads about the late scientist and the contents of the jar. Finally, they picked up the jar with a long rod of static energy—some metal, I suppose. They took it away.

Unfortunately, this time it seems I had eaten a physicist working for the government. More and more mush shapes of humans clustered round Doctor McPherson, and one came hurrying up from another laboratory.

"Raw ozone," he thought as he came. "This fellow needs
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watching. Couldn't get ozone like that except in space. And now he happens to be around when we lose our top physicist. And that's the second accident of the day. Yes, sir, this McPherson needs watching! You can never tell where sabotage will break out."

He grasped the doctor's arm and said something in a faint wave of mush that I could not see clearly enough to understand.

"Me? Ridiculous! I was just..." thought McPherson. But he shrugged and turned away.

Well, I couldn't leave him in a mess like that, so I followed Doctor McPherson home.

I had to explain. But how?

And there was the problem. How can a being based on energy, like me, communicate with a being based on matter, like him?

Obviously, I had to signal in some way, give some signs of life that would be intelligible to him.

He was sitting in a chair—shape of strand energy interwoven together, and he was thinking gloomy thoughts. He flicked on the televiewer. And there was the answer.

I found the input flow, followed it into the cathode tube and ate the pictures off the screen in a discriminating manner.

They were too small and scattered to make a mouthful,

but that wasn't the point. I was able to signal to him! I ate pieces of the picture coming through and left regular black holes on the tube face, dot, dash, dash-dash-dot.

Doctor McPherson stood up, approached the set, reached in his pocket for a bottle and took two pills. And then he switched off the set and went to bed.

"Now my eyes are playing up. Liver," his thoughts trailed away.

After awhile, I saw a better answer. One man would be scared to do anything even if I did get in touch with him. What I needed was a larger scale. If several dozen mush...several dozen people started speculating about me, they would lend each other moral support and they would start looking for my signs. Then I could tell them all about the little error of appetite.

So I went back down the main power line from Doctor McPherson's home—high grade, pure liquor in that line!—and tracked it upstream to the city power house. But when I took a deep bite, all the generators stopped and an auxiliary circuit from somewhere else started up.

I ate a piece of main coil in disgust.

Well, that was no use. And then I remembered the little beings' comments on a food flood due in the spaceway. A sunburst, no doubt. A magnetic storm on the sun would

certainly send a harvest out through space for the beings. But it would louse up the planetary radio system.

And there I had an answer. All I had to do was remove the radio interference in a planned way and every receiver on half the world would receive my signals. How easy it was!

So I went back up to the first layer of the doughnut round the Earth where there was a field of fresh energy. As the food came flooding in from the sun I gobbled it up. Mouthful. Pause. Mouthful, mouthful. Pause. Mouthful, mouthful, mouthful. Pause.

I worked up and down the numbers in progression, swallowing every lump of solar radiation within reach.

But I guess I was carried away by the enjoyable eating. A lot more time passed than I had intended; and when I came down again to read a few thoughts, the world was freezing in parts, and the sea was boiling in others, and the mush lay flat as a desert in wide patches.

I worked it out, eventually. No energy means no evaporation, thus no clouds and no rain for vegetation. And that means no carbon dioxide layer to protect the planet, in turn leading to excessive radiation when I stopped eating, hence deserts and a boiling ocean and parts of the land frozen solid.

Not a very good message.

by James Stammers

WELL, I cleaned up as best I could, but it was drudgery sipping up the dull, flat-tasting thermal energy of the oceans. Tidal forces and magnetic flows are stodgy, uninteresting diets. You might as well eat straight mush.

I decided not to try that again. It had too many repercussions. What I wanted was a nice simple signal.

A volcano would do excellently, I thought—Indian smoke signals on a vast scale.

So I hunted over the mush until I came to a reasonably active fountain, probably Vesuvius but I'm not sure; one blob of mush looks like another. And I drank the whole internal fire in bursts. Anyone with any sense could have seen the Morse-coded eruptions that I let go through.

But they didn't.

They missed my signals altogether. Chiefly because I had disturbed the balance of stresses down at the foot of the volcano, deep in the mush, and when I came out it was dancing about in ripples and shakes. I don't suppose many people would stop in the middle of an earthquake to note the signals coming out of the local volcano. Anyway, no one did.

As you know, the damage was quite widespread. So I went round to the other side of the mush, where they were less distracted. What I needed was a test-piece. Something which was already the focus

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of serious scientific interest. Something being carefully observed already.

The nuclear power plant in the nearest city mush-blocks seemed a reasonable choice. And good eating it made, too. Pure unadulterated flavor, strong and pulsing with vitality. I've never had a better meal.

But when I came out of the reactor and let it continue its food...its energy production, all the humans had vanished. They hadn't seen a thing. I found them miles away under the surface of the mush-level expecting to be blown up. They assumed that when the pile ceased its output it was building up internally, so they broadcast an emergency and took to their bunkers. And then they were busy for weeks correcting the false alarm and dealing with complaints from freezer companies and householders and utility commissions. So I left the area to sort itself out.

Very well, I thought. This time, I'll choose a nuclear device that is expected to explode and eat it before it does, while everyone is watching.

It wasn't difficult to find. There was a long smear of food in the air all round the world, as if a lot of clumsy eaters had dribbled. The main source was easy to locate.

I found a long stalk thing of mush and a mush shed on top and sat there waiting.

Eventually, a team of mushes hoisted up a device with delicate little tidbit cores, and hurried away. So this was a fusion bomb, was it? I waited until it was triggered off, took a strong hold and ate the lot at the moment of burst.

For the record, swallowing a nuclear explosion is not very comfortable. I had indigestion for weeks. But I made it.

It was a waste of time.

As usual, I had overlooked something. The conversion was as massive as the energy I ate, and I found out what the silver beads Doctor McPherson had put in the jar were. Energy eaten by e beings converts into sound and ozone. And the conversion of the nuclear explosion sent great balls of sound rolling over the country, deafening the people, flattening structures by vibration, and releasing flows of raw ozone, which promptly started fires; and that in turn disturbed the cloud masses and produced unprecedented floods.

I was munching quietly on a power line, overlooking the great stretch of level mush of water up to and over the horizon, when Doctor McPherson found me.

A repair man drove him up, let him off the mush vehicle and drove off fast.

"You nutty old coot, you wanted to see the next breakdown and here it is," the repair man's thoughts shot away.

"I may be nuts," Doctor Mc-

Pherson said to himself, standing underneath me, "but I have an odd idea there's intelligent mischief behind all this."

He sat on a rock-shaped mound of mush nearby.

"So here I am, following a idiotic hunch," he thought, and held out a large jar with a most entrancing tidbit of radioactivity, cobalt flavor, in the bottom.

Naturally, I went down happily and gobbled it up.

And Doctor McPherson put the lid on. A lid of thick-meshed mush, leaden and inedible. It took me some time of fruitless revolving to discover I was locked in a Leyden jar with a complicated series of non-conducting layers.

I'm starving.

OH, he feeds me now and then, and the other day he put in a one-way circuit so that I could operate this electric typewriter.

But he says I can't come out until war is declared and the Pentagon signals him on emergency. Then he'll take the lid off and I can eat the nearest rocket heading this way. He's promised me that.

He needn't worry. I'm so hungry I'll eat the lot. But who wants to be a secret air defense weapon locked in a Leyden jar?

Fellow e, keep away from this mush and these mushmen! They are dangerous.

What's more, they have no finer feelings!

END

by James Stammers

You don't have to be crazy to be an earth diplomat — but on Groac it sure helps!

THE MADMAN FROM EARTH

BY KEITH LAUMER

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

I

“THE Consul for the Terrestrial States,” Retief said, “presents his compliments, et cetera, to the Ministry of Culture of the Groacian Autonomy, and with reference to the Ministry’s invitation to attend a recital of interpretive grimacing, has the honor to express regret that he will be unable—”

“You can’t turn this invitation down,” Administrative Assistant Meuhl said flatly. “I’ll make that ‘accepts with pleasure’.”

Retief exhaled a plume of cigar smoke.

“Miss Meuhl,” he said, “in the past couple of weeks I’ve sat through six light-concerts, four attempts at chamber music, and god knows how many assorted folk-art festivals. I’ve

been tied up every off-duty hour since I got here—”

“You can’t offend the Groaci,” Miss Meuhl said sharply. “Consul Whaffle would never have been so rude.”

“Whaffle left here three months ago,” Retief said, “leaving me in charge.”

“Well,” Miss Meuhl said, snapping off the dictyper. “I’m sure I don’t know what excuse I can give the Minister.”

“Never mind the excuses,” Retief said. “Just tell him I won’t be there.” He stood up.

“Are you leaving the office?” Miss Meuhl adjusted her glasses. “I have some important letters here for your signature.”

“I don’t recall dictating any letters today, Miss Meuhl,” Retief said, pulling on a light cape.

"I wrote them for you. They're just as Consul Whaffle would have wanted them."

"Did you write all Whaffle's letters for him, Miss Meuhl?"

"Consul Whaffle was an extremely busy man," Miss Meuhl said stiffly. "He had complete confidence in me."

"Since I'm cutting out the culture from now on," Retief said, "I won't be so busy."

"Well!" Miss Meuhl said. "May I ask where you'll be if something comes up?"

"I'm going over to the Foreign Office Archives."

Miss Meuhl blinked behind thick lenses. "Whatever for?"

Retief looked thoughtfully at Miss Meuhl. "You've been here on Groac for four years, Miss Meuhl. What was behind the coup d'etat that put the present government in power?"

"I'm sure I haven't pried into—"

"What about that Terrestrial cruiser? The one that disappeared out this way about ten years back?"

"Mr. Retief, those are just the sort of questions we *avoid* with the Groaci. I certainly hope you're not thinking of openly intruding—"

"Why?"

"The Groaci are a very sensitive race. They don't welcome outworlders raking up things. They've been gracious enough to let us live down the fact that Terrestrials subject-

ed them to deep humiliation on one occasion."

"You mean when they came looking for the cruiser?"

"I, for one, am ashamed of the high-handed tactics that were employed, grilling these innocent people as though they were criminals. We try never to reopen that wound, Mr. Retief."

"They never found the cruiser, did they?"

"Certainly not on Groac."

Retief nodded. "Thanks, Miss Meuhl," he said. "I'll be back before you close the office." Miss Meuhl's face was set in lines of grim disapproval as he closed the door.

THE pale-featured Groacian vibrated his throat-bladder in a distressed bleat.

"Not to enter the Archives," he said in his faint voice. "The denial of permission. The deep regret of the Archivist."

"The importance of my task here," Retief said, enunciating the glottal dialect with difficulty. "My interest in local history."

"The impossibility of access to outworlders. To depart quietly."

"The necessity that I enter."

"The specific instructions of the Archivist." The Groacian's voice rose to a whisper. "To insist no longer. To give up this idea!"

"OK, Skinny, I know when I'm licked," Retief said in

Terran. "To keep your nose clean."

Outside, Retief stood for a moment looking across at the deeply carved windowless stucco facades lining the street, then started off in the direction of the Terrestrial Consulate General. The few Groacians on the street eyed him furtively, veered to avoid him as he passed. Flimsy high-wheeled ground cars puffed silently along the resilient pavement. The air was clean and cool.

At the office, Miss Meuhl would be waiting with another list of complaints.

Retief studied the carving over the open doorways along the street. An elaborate one picked out in pinkish paint seemed to indicate the Groacian equivalent of a bar. Retief went in.

A Groacian bartender was dispensing clay pots of alcoholic drink from the bar-pit at the center of the room. He looked at Retief and froze in mid-motion, a metal tube poised over a waiting pot.

"To enjoy a cooling drink," Retief said in Groacian, squatting down at the edge of the pit. "To sample a true Groacian beverage."

"To not enjoy my poor offerings," the Groacian mumbled. "A pain in the digestive sacs; to express regret."

"To not worry," Retief said, irritated. "To pour it out and let me decide whether I like it."

THE MADMAN FROM EARTH

"To be grappled in by peace-keepers for poisoning of—foreigners." The barkeep looked around for support, found none. The Groaci customers, eyes elsewhere, were drifting away.

"To get the lead out," Retief said, placing a thick gold-piece in the dish provided. "To shake a tentacle."

"The procuring of a cage," a thin voice called from the sidelines. "The displaying of a freak."

RETIEF turned. A tall Groacian vibrated his mandibles in a gesture of contempt. From his bluish throat coloration, it was apparent the creature was drunk.

"To choke in your upper sac," the bartender hissed, extending his eyes toward the drunk. "To keep silent, litter-mate of drones."

"To swallow your own poison, dispenser of vileness," the drunk whispered. "To find a proper cage for this zoo-piece." He wavered toward Retief. "To show this one in the streets, like all freaks."

"Seen a lot of freaks like me, have you?" Retief asked, interestedly.

"To speak intelligibly, malodorous outworlder," the drunk said. The barkeep whispered something, and two customers came up to the drunk, took his arms and helped him to the door.

"To get a cage!" the drunk shrilled. "To keep the animals

in their own stinking place."

"I've changed my mind," Retief said to the bartender. "To be grateful as hell, but to have to hurry off now." He followed the drunk out the door. The other Groaci released him, hurried back inside. Retief looked at the weaving alien.

"To begone, freak," the Groacian whispered.

"To be pals," Retief said. "To be kind to dumb animals."

"To have you hauled away to a stockyard, ill-odored foreign livestock."

"To not be angry, fragrant native," Retief said. "To permit me to chum with you."

"To flee before I take a cane to you!"

"To have a drink together—"

"To not endure such insolence!" The Groacian advanced toward Retief. Retief backed away.

"To hold hands," Retief said. "To be palsy-walsy—"

The Groacian reached for him, missed. A passer-by stepped around him, head down, scuttled away. Retief backed into the opening to a narrow crossway and offered further verbal familiarities to the drunken local, who followed, furious. Retief backed, rounded a corner into a narrow alley-like passage, deserted, silent... except for the following Groacian.

Retief stepped around him, seized his collar and yanked. The Groacian fell on his back.

Retief stood over him. The downed native half-rose; Retief put a foot against his chest and pushed.

"To not be going anywhere for a few minutes," Retief said. "To stay right here and have a nice long talk."

II

"**T**H E R E you are!" Miss Meuhl said, eyeing Retief over her lenses. "There are two gentlemen waiting to see you. Groacian gentlemen."

"Government men, I imagine. Word travels fast." Retief pulled off his cape. "This saves me the trouble of paying another call at the Foreign Ministry."

"What have you been doing? They seem very upset, I don't mind telling you."

"I'm sure you don't. Come along. And bring an official recorder."

Two Groaci wearing heavy eye-shields and elaborate crest ornaments indicative of rank rose as Retief entered the room. Neither offered a courteous snap of the mandibles, Retief noted. They were mad, all right.

"I am Fith, of the Terrestrial Desk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Consul," the taller Groacian said, in lisping Terran. "May I present Shluh, of the Internal Police?"

"Sit down, gentlemen," Retief said. They resumed their seats. Miss Meuhl hovered nervously, then sat on the

edge of a comfortless chair.

"Oh, it's such a pleasure—" she began.

"Never mind that," Retief said. "These gentlemen didn't come here to sip tea today."

"So true," Fith said. "Frankly, I have had a most disturbing report, Mr. Consul. I shall ask Shluh to recount it." He nodded to the police chief.

"One hour ago," The Groacian said, "a Groacian national was brought to hospital suffering from serious contusions. Questioning of this individual revealed that he had been set upon and beaten by a foreigner. A Terrestrial, to be precise. Investigation by my department indicates that the description of the culprit closely matches that of the Terrestrial Consul."

Miss Meuhl gasped audibly.

"Have you ever heard," Retief said, looking steadily at Fith, "of a Terrestrial cruiser, the *ISV Terrific*, which dropped from sight in this sector nine years ago?"

"Really!" Miss Meuhl exclaimed, rising. "I wash my hands—"

"Just keep that recorder going," Retief snapped.

"I'll not be a party—"

"You'll do as you're told, Miss Meuhl," Retief said quietly. "I'm telling you to make an official sealed record of this conversation."

Miss Meuhl sat down.

Fith puffed out his throat indignantly. "You reopen an
THE MADMAN FROM EARTH

old wound, Mr. Consul. It reminds us of certain illegal treatment at Terrestrial hands—"

"Hogwash," Retief said. "That tune went over with my predecessors, but it hits a sour note with me."

"All our efforts," Miss Meuhl said, "to live down that terrible episode! And you—"

"Terrible? I understand that a Terrestrial task force stood off Groac and sent a delegation down to ask questions. They got some funny answers, and stayed on to dig around a little. After a week they left. Somewhat annoying to the Groaci, maybe—at the most. If they were innocent."

"IF!" Miss Meuhl burst out.

"If, indeed!" Fith said, his weak voice trembling. "I must protest your—"

"SAVE the protests, Fith. You have some explaining to do. And I don't think your story will be good enough."

"It is for you to explain! This person who was beaten—"

"Not beaten. Just rapped a few times to loosen his memory."

"Then you admit—"

"It worked, too. He remembered lots of things, once he put his mind to it."

Fith rose; Shluh followed suit.

"I shall ask for your immediate recall, Mr. Consul. Were it not for your diplomatic im-

munity, I should do more—”

“Why did the government fall, Fith? It was just after the task force paid its visit, and before the arrival of the first Terrestrial diplomatic mission.”

“This is an internal matter!” Fith cried, in his faint Groacian voice. “The new regime has shown itself most amiable to you Terrestrials. It has outdone itself—”

“—to keep the Terrestrial consul and his staff in the dark,” Retief said. “And the same goes for the few terrestrial businessmen you’ve visited. This continual round of culture; no social contacts outside the diplomatic circle; no travel permits to visit outlying districts, or your satellite—”

“Enough!” Fith’s mandibles quivered in distress. “I can talk no more of this matter—”

“You’ll talk to me, or there’ll be a task force here in five days to do the talking,” Retief said.

“You can’t!” Miss Meuhl gasped.

Retief turned a steady look on Miss Meuhl. She closed her mouth. The Groaci sat down.

“Answer me this one,” Retief said, looking at Shluh. “A few years back—about nine, I think—there was a little parade held here. Some curious looking creatures were captured. After being securely caged, they were exhibited to the gentle Groaci public. Hauled through the streets.

Very educational, no doubt. A highly cultural show.

“Funny thing about these animals. They wore clothes. They seemed to communicate with each other. Altogether it was a very amusing exhibit.

“Tell me, Shluh, what happened to those six Terrestrials after the parade was over?”

FITH made a choked noise and spoke rapidly to Shluh in Groacian. Shluh retracted his eyes, shrank down in his chair. Miss Meuhl opened her mouth, closed it and blinked rapidly.

“How did they die?” Retief snapped. “Did you murder them, cut their throats, shoot them or bury them alive? What amusing end did you figure out for them? Research, maybe? Cut them open to see what made them yell...”

“No!” Fith gasped. “I must correct this terrible false impression at once.”

“False impression, hell,” Retief said. “They were Terrans! A simple narco-interrogation would get that out of any Groacian who saw the parade.”

“Yes,” Fith said weakly. “It is true, they were Terrestrials. But there was no killing.”

“They’re alive?”

“Alas, no. They...died.”

Miss Meuhl yelped faintly.

“I see,” Retief said. “They died.”

“We tried to keep them alive, of course. But we did not know what foods—”

“Didn’t take the trouble to

find out, either, did you?"

"They fell ill," Fith said. "One by one..."

"We'll deal with that question later," Retief said. "Right now, I want more information. Where did you get them? Where did you hide the ship? What happened to the rest of the crew? Did they 'fall ill' before the big parade?"

"There were no more! Absolutely, I assure you!"

"Killed in the crash landing?"

"No crash landing. The ship descended intact, east of the city. The ... Terrestrials... were unharmed. Naturally, we feared them. They were strange to us. We had never before seen such beings."

"Stepped off the ship with guns blazing, did they?"

"Guns? No, no guns—"

"They raised their hands, didn't they? Asked for help. You helped them; helped them to death."

"How could we know?" Fith moaned.

"How could you know a flotilla would show up in a few months looking for them, you mean? That was a shock, wasn't it? I'll bet you had a brisk time of it hiding the ship, and shutting everybody up. A close call, eh?"

"We were afraid," Shluh said. "We are a simple people. We feared the strange creatures from the alien craft. We did not kill them, but we felt it was as well they...did not survive. Then, when the war-

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ships came, we realized our error. But we feared to speak. We purged our guilty leaders, concealed what had happened, and...offered our friendship. We invited the opening of diplomatic relations. We made a blunder, it is true, a great blunder. But we have tried to make amends..."

"Where is the ship?"

"The ship?"

"What did you do with it? It was too big to just walk off and forget. Where is it?"

The two Groacians exchanged looks.

"We wish to show our contrition," Fith said. "We will show you the ship."

"Miss Meuhl," Retief said. "If I don't come back in a reasonable length of time, transmit that recording to Regional Headquarters, sealed." He stood, looked at the Groaci.

"Let's go," he said.

RETIEF stooped under the heavy timbers shoring the entry to the cavern. He peered into the gloom at the curving flank of the space-burned hull.

"Any lights in here?" he asked.

A Groacian threw a switch. A weak bluish glow sprang up.

Retief walked along the raised wooden catwalk, studying the ship. Empty emplacements gaped below lensless scanner eyes. Littered decking was visible within the half-open entry port. Near the bow

the words 'IVS Terrific B7 New Terra' were lettered in bright chrome duralloy.

"How did you get it in here?" Retief asked.

"It was hauled here from the landing point, some nine miles distant," Fith said, his voice thinner than ever. "This is a natural crevasse. The vessel was lowered into it and roofed over."

"How did you shield it so the detectors didn't pick it up?"

"All here is high-grade iron ore," Fith said, waving a member. "Great veins of almost pure metal."

Retief grunted. "Let's go inside."

Shluh came forward with a hand-lamp. The party entered the ship.

Retief clambered up a narrow companionway, glanced around the interior of the control compartment. Dust was thick on the deck, the stanchions where acceleration couches had been mounted, the empty instrument panels, the litter of sheared bolts, scraps of wire and paper. A thin frosting of rust dulled the exposed metal where cutting torches had sliced away heavy shielding. There was a faint odor of stale bedding.

"The cargo compartment—" Shluh began.

"I've seen enough," Retief said.

Silently, the Groacians led the way back out through the tunnel and into the late after-

noon sunshine. As they climbed the slope to the steam car, Fith came to Retief's side.

"Indeed, I hope that this will be the end of this unfortunate affair," he said. "Now that all has been fully and honestly shown—"

"You can skip all that," Retief said. "You're nine years late. The crew was still alive when the task force called, I imagine. You killed them—or let them die—rather than take the chance of admitting what you'd done."

"We were at fault," Fith said abjectly. "Now we wish only friendship."

"The *Terrific* was a heavy cruiser, about twenty thousand tons." Retief looked grimly at the slender Foreign Office official. "Where is she, Fith? I won't settle for a hundred-ton lifeboat."

FITH erected his eye stalks so violently that one eyeshield fell off.

"I know nothing of... of..." He stopped. His throat vibrated rapidly as he struggled for calm.

"My government can entertain no further accusations, Mr. Consul," he said at last. "I have been completely candid with you, I have overlooked your probing into matters not properly within your sphere of responsibility. My patience is at an end."

"Where is that ship?" Retief rapped out. "You never learn, do you? You're still

convinced you can hide the whole thing and forget it. I'm telling you you can't."

"We return to the city now," Fith said. "I can do no more."

"You can and you will, Fith," Retief said. "I intend to get to the truth of this matter."

Fith spoke to Shluh in rapid Groacian. The police chief gestured to his four armed constables. They moved to ring Retief in.

Retief eyed Fith. "Don't try it," he said. "You'll just get yourself in deeper."

Fith clacked his mandibles angrily, eye stalks canted aggressively toward the Terrestrial.

"Out of deference to your diplomatic status, Terrestrial, I shall ignore your insulting remarks," Fith said in his reedy voice. "Let us now return to the city."

Retief looked at the four policemen. "I see your point," he said.

Fith followed him into the car, sat rigidly at the far end of the seat.

"I advise you to remain very close to your consulate," Fith said. "I advise you to dismiss these fancies from your mind, and to enjoy the cultural aspects of life at Groac. Especially, I should not venture out of the city, or appear overly curious about matters of concern only to the Groacian government."

In the front seat, Shluh

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looked straight ahead. The loosely-sprung vehicle bobbed and swayed along the narrow highway. Retief listened to the rhythmic puffing of the motor and said nothing.

III

"**M**ISS Meuhl," Retief said, "I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you. I have to move rapidly now, to catch the Groaci off guard."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Miss Meuhl snapped, her eyes sharp behind the heavy lenses.

"If you'll listen, you may find out," Retief said. "I have no time to waste, Miss Meuhl. They won't be expecting an immediate move—I hope—and that may give me the latitude I need."

"You're still determined to make an issue of that incident!" Miss Meuhl snorted. "I really can hardly blame the Groaci. They are not a sophisticated race; they had never before met aliens."

"You're ready to forgive a great deal, Miss Meuhl. But it's not what happened nine years ago I'm concerned with. It's what's happening now. I've told you that it was only a lifeboat the Groaci have hidden out. Don't you understand the implication? That vessel couldn't have come far. The cruiser itself must be somewhere near by. I want to know where!"

"The Groaci don't know. They're a very cultured, gentle people. You can do irreparable harm to the reputation of Terrestrials if you insist—"

"That's my decision," Retief said. "I have a job to do and we're wasting time." He crossed the room to his desk, opened a drawer and took out a slim-barreled needler.

"This office is being watched. Not very efficiently, if I know the Groaci. I think I can get past them all right."

"Where are you going with ...that?" Miss Meuhl stared at the needler. "What in the world—"

"The Groaci won't waste any time destroying every piece of paper in their files relating to this thing. I have to get what I need before it's too late. If I wait for an official Inquiry Commission, they'll find nothing but blank smiles."

"You're out of your mind!" Miss Meuhl stood up, quivering with indignation. "You're like a...a..."

"You and I are in a tight spot, Miss Meuhl. The logical next move for the Groaci is to dispose of both of us. We're the only ones who know happened. Fith almost did the job this afternoon, but I bluffed him out—for the moment."

Miss Meuhl emitted a shrill laugh. "Your fantasies are getting the better of you," she gasped. "In danger, indeed!

Disposing of me! I've never heard anything so ridiculous."

"Stay in this office. Close and safe-lock the door. You've got food and water in the dispenser. I suggest you stock up, before they shut the supply down. Don't let anyone in, on any pretext whatever. I'll keep in touch with you via hand-phone."

"What are you planning to do?"

"If I don't make it back here, transmit the sealed record of this afternoon's conversation, along with the information I've given you. Beam it through on a mayday priority. Then tell the Groaci what you've done and sit tight. I think you'll be all right. It won't be easy to blast in here and anyway, they won't make things worse by killing you. A force can be here in a week."

"I'll do nothing of the sort! The Groaci are very fond of me! You...Johnny-come-lately! Roughneck! Setting out to destroy—"

"Blame it on me if it will make you feel any better," Retief said, "but don't be fool enough to trust them." He pulled on a cape, opened the door.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," he said. Miss Meuhl stared after him silently as he closed the door.

IT was an hour before dawn when Retief keyed the combination to the safe-lock and stepped into the darkened con-

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sular office. He looked tired.

Miss Meuhl, dozing in a chair, awoke with a start. She looked at Retief, rose and snapped on a light, turned to stare.

"What in the world—Where have you been? What's happened to your clothing?"

"I got a little dirty. Don't worry about it." Retief went to his desk, opened a drawer and replaced the needler.

"Where have you been?" Miss Meuhl demanded. "I stayed here—"

"I'm glad you did," Retief said. "I hope you piled up a supply of food and water from the dispenser, too. We'll be holed up here for a week, at least." He jotted figures on a pad. "Warm up the official sender. I have a long transmission for Regional Headquarters."

"Are you going to tell me where you've been?"

"I have a message to get off first, Miss Meuhl," Retief said sharply. "I've been to the Foreign Ministry," he added. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"At this hour? There's no one there..."

"Exactly."

Miss Meuhl gasped. "You mean you broke in? You burgled the Foreign Office?"

"That's right," Retief said calmly. "Now—"

"This is absolutely the end!" Miss Meuhl said. "Thank heaven I've already—"

"Get that sender going,

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woman!" Retief snapped. "This is important."

"I've already done so, Mr. Retief!" Miss Meuhl said harshly. "I've been waiting for you to come back here..." She turned to the communicator, flipped levers. The screen snapped aglow, and a wavering long-distance image appeared.

"He's here now," Miss Meuhl said to the screen. She looked at Retief triumphantly.

"That's good," Retief said. "I don't think the Groaci can knock us off the air, but—"

"I have done my duty, Mr. Retief," Miss Meuhl said. "I made a full report to Regional Headquarters last night, as soon as you left this office. Any doubts I may have had as to the rightness of that decision have been completely dispelled by what you've just told me."

Retief looked at her levelly. "You've been a busy girl, Miss Meuhl. Did you mention the six Terrestrials who were killed here?"

"That had no bearing on the matter of your wild behavior! I must say, in all my years in the Corps, I've never encountered a personality less suited to diplomatic work."

THE screen crackled, the ten-second transmission lag having elapsed. "Mr. Retief," the face on the screen said, "I am Counsellor Pardy, DSO-1, Deputy Under-secretary for

the region. I have received a report on your conduct which makes it mandatory for me to relieve you administratively, vice 'Miss Yolanda Meuhl, DAO-9. Pending the findings of a Board of Inquiry, you will—"

Retief reached out and snapped off the communicator. The triumphant look faded from Miss Meuhl's face.

"Why, what is the meaning—"

"If I'd listened any longer, I might have heard something I couldn't ignore. I can't afford that, at this moment. Listen, Miss Meuhl," Retief went on earnestly, "I've found the missing cruiser."

"You heard him relieve you!"

"I heard him say he was *going* to, Miss Meuhl. But until I've heard and acknowledged a verbal order, it has no force. If I'm wrong, he'll get my resignation. If I'm right, that suspension would be embarrassing all around."

"You're defying lawful authority! I'm in charge here now." Miss Meuhl stepped to the local communicator.

"I'm going to report this terrible thing to the Groaci at once, and offer my profound—"

"Don't touch that screen," Retief said. "You go sit in that corner where I can keep an eye on you. I'm going to make a sealed tape for transmission to Headquarters, along with a call for an armed

task force. Then we'll settle down to wait."

Retief ignored Miss Meuhl's fury as he spoke into the recorder.

The local communicator chimed. Miss Meuhl jumped up, staring at it.

"Go ahead," Retief said. "Answer it."

A Groacian official appeared on the screen.

"Yolanda Meuhl," he said without preamble, "for the Foreign Minister of the Groacian Autonomy, I herewith accredit you as Terrestrial Consul to Groac, in accordance with the advices transmitted to my government direct from the Terrestrial Headquarters. As consul, you are requested to make available for questioning Mr. J. Retief, former consul, in connection with the assault on two peace keepers and illegal entry into the offices of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs."

"Why, why," Miss Meuhl stammered. "Yes, of course. And I do want to express my deepest regrets—"

RETIEF rose, went to the communicator, assisted Miss Meuhl aside.

"Listen carefully, Fith," he said. "Your bluff has been called. You don't come in and we don't come out. Your camouflage worked for nine years, but it's all over now. I suggest you keep your heads and resist the temptation to make

matters worse than they are."

"Miss Meuhl," Fith said, "a peace squad waits outside your consulate. It is clear you are in the hands of a dangerous lunatic. As always, the Groaci wish only friendship with the Terrestrials, but—"

"Don't bother," Retief said. "You know what was in those files I looked over this morning."

Retief turned at a sound behind him. Miss Meuhl was at the door, reaching for the safe-lock release...

"Don't!" Retief jumped—too late.

The door burst inward. A crowd of crested Groaci pressed into the room, pushed Miss Meuhl back, aimed scatter guns at Retief. Police Chief Shluh pushed forward.

"Attempt no violence, Terrestrial," he said. "I cannot promise to restrain my men."

"You're violating Terrestrial territory, Shluh," Retief said steadily. "I suggest you move back out the same way you came in."

"I invited them here," Miss Meuhl spoke up. "They are here at my express wish."

"Are they? Are you sure you meant to go this far, Miss Meuhl? A squad of armed Groaci in the consulate?"

"You are the consul, Miss Yolanda Meuhl," Shluh said. "Would it not be best if we removed this deranged person to a place of safety?"

"You're making a serious mistake, Shluh," Retief said.

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"Yes," Miss Meuhl said. "You're quite right, Mr. Shluh. Please escort Mr. Retief to his quarters in this building—"

"I don't advise you to violate my diplomatic immunity, Fith," Retief said.

"As chief of mission," Miss Meuhl said quickly, "I hereby waive immunity in the case of Mr. Retief."

Shluh produced a hand recorder. "Kindly repeat your statement, Madam, officially," he said. "I wish no question to arise later."

"Don't be a fool, woman," Retief said. "Don't you see what you're letting yourself in for? This would be a hell of a good time for you to figure out whose side you're on."

"I'm on the side of common decency!"

"You've been taken in. These people are concealing—"

"You think all women are fools, don't you, Mr. Retief?" She turned to the police chief and spoke into the microphone he held up.

"That's an illegal waiver," Retief said. "I'm consul here, whatever rumors you've heard. This thing's coming out into the open, whatever you do. Don't add violation of the Consulate to the list of Groacian atrocities."

"Take the man," Shluh said.

TWO tall Groaci came to Retief's side, guns aimed at his chest.

"Determined to hang yourselves, aren't you?" Retief said. "I hope you have sense enough not to lay a hand on this poor fool here." He jerked a thumb at Miss Meuhl. "She doesn't know anything. I hadn't had time to tell her yet. She thinks you're a band of angels."

The cop at Retief's side swung the butt of his scatter-gun, connected solidly with Retief's jaw. Retief staggered against a Groacian, was caught and thrust upright, blood running down onto his shirt. Miss Meuhl yelped. Shluh barked at the guard in shrill Groacian, then turned to stare at Miss Meuhl.

"What has this man told you?"

"I—nothing. I refused to listen to his ravings."

"He said nothing to you of some...alleged...involvement?"

"I've told you!" Miss Meuhl said sharply. She looked at the blood on Retief's shirt.

"He told me nothing," she whispered. "I swear it."

"Let it lie, boys," Retief said, "Before you spoil that good impression."

Shluh looked at Miss Meuhl for a long moment. Then he turned.

"Let us go," he said. He turned back to Miss Meuhl. "Do not leave this building until further advice," he said.

"But...I am the Terrestrial consul!"

"For your safety, madam."

The people are aroused at the beating of Groacian nationals by an...alien."

"So long, Meuhlsie," Retief said. "You played it real foxy."

"You'll...lock him in his quarters?" Miss Meuhl said.

"What is done with him is now a Groacian affair, Miss Meuhl. You yourself have withdrawn the protection of your government."

"I didn't mean—"

"Don't start having second thoughts," Retief said. "They can make you miserable."

"I had no choice," Miss Meuhl said. "I had to consider the best interest of the Service."

"My mistake, I guess," Retief said. "I was thinking of the best interests of a Terrestrial cruiser with three hundred men aboard."

"Enough," Shluh said. "Remove this criminal." He gestured to the peace keepers.

"Move along," he said to Retief. He turned to Miss Meuhl.

"A pleasure to deal with you, Madam."

IV

RETIEF stood quietly in the lift, stepped out at the ground floor and followed docilely down the corridor and across the pavement to a waiting steam car.

One of the peace keepers rounded the vehicle to enter on the other side. Two

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stooped to climb into the front seat. Shluh gestured Retief into the back seat and got in behind him. The others moved off on foot.

The car started up and pulled away. The cop in the front seat turned to look at Retief.

"To have some sport with it, and then to kill it," he said.

"To have a fair trial first," Shluh said. The car rocked and jounced, rounded a corner, puffed along between ornamented pastel facades.

"To have a trial and then to have a bit of sport," the cop said.

"To suck the eggs in your own hill," Retief said. "To make another stupid mistake."

Shluh raised his short ceremonial club and cracked Retief across the temple. Retief shook his head, tensed—

The cop in the front seat beside the driver turned and rammed the barrel of his scatter-gun against Retief's ribs.

"To make no move, outworlder," he said. Shluh raised his club and carefully struck Retief again. He slumped.

The car swayed, rounded another corner. Retief slid over against the police chief.

"To fend this animal—" Shluh began. His weak voice was cut off short as Retief's hand shot out, took him by the throat and snapped him down onto the floor. As the guard on Retief's left lunged, Retief uppercut him, slam-

ming his head against the door post. He grabbed the scatter-gun as it fell, pushed into the mandibles of the Groacian in the front seat.

"To put your popgun over the seat—carefully—and drop it," he said.

The driver slammed on his brakes, whirled to raise his gun. Retief cracked the gun barrel against the head of the Groacian before him, then swiveled to aim it at the driver.

"To keep your eyestalks on the road," he said. The driver grabbed at the tiller and shrank against the window, watching Retief with one eye, driving with the other.

"To gun this thing," Retief said. "To keep moving."

Shluh stirred on the floor. Retief put a foot on him, pressed him back. The cop beside Retief moved. Retief pushed him off the seat onto the floor.

He held the scatter-gun with one hand and mopped at the blood on his face with the other. The car bounded over the irregular surface of the road, puffing furiously.

"Your death will not be an easy one, Terrestrial," Shluh said in Terran.

"No easier than I can help," Retief said. "Shut up for now, I want to think."

THE car passed the last of the relief-crusted mounds, sped along between tilled fields.



"Slow down," Retief said. The driver obeyed.

"Turn down this side road."

The car bumped off onto an unpaved surface, threaded its way back among tall stalks.

"Stop here." The car stopped. It blew off steam and sat trembling as the hot engine idled roughly.

Retief opened the door, took his foot off Shluh.

"Sit up," he ordered. "You two in front listen carefully." Shluh sat up, rubbing his throat.

"Three of you are getting out here," Retief said. "Good old Shluh is going to stick around to drive for me. If I get that nervous feeling that the cops are after me, I'll toss him out to confuse them. That will be pretty messy, at high speed. Shluh, tell them to sit tight until dark and forget about sounding any alarms. I'd hate to see your carapace split and spill loveable you all over the pavement."

"To burst your throat sac, evil-smelling beast!" Shluh hissed.

"Sorry, I haven't got one." Retief put the gun under Shluh's ear. "Tell them, Shluh. I can drive myself, in a pinch."

"To do as the foreign one says; to stay hidden until dark," Shluh said.

"Everybody out," Retief said. "And take this with you." He nudged the unconscious Groacian. "Shluh, you get in the driver's seat. You

others stay where I can see you."

Retief watched as the Groaci silently followed instructions.

"All right, Shluh," Retief said softly. "Let's go. Take me to Groac Spaceport by the shortest route that doesn't go through the city. And be very careful about making any sudden movements."

FORTY minutes later, Shluh steered the car up to the sentry-guarded gate in the security fence surrounding the military enclosure at Groac Spaceport.

"Don't yield to any rash impulses," Retief whispered as a crested Groacian soldier came up. Shluh grated his mandibles in helpless fury.

"Drone-master Shluh, Internal Security," he croaked. The guard tilted his eyes toward Retief.

"The guest of the Autonomy," Shluh added. "To let me pass or to rot in this spot, fool?"

"To pass, Drone-master," the sentry mumbled. He was still staring at Retief as the car moved jerkily away.

"You are as good as pegged out on the hill in the pleasure pits now, Terrestrial," Shluh said in Terran. "Why do you venture here?"

"Pull over there in the shadow of the tower and stop," Retief said.

Shluh complied. Retief studied the row of four slen-

der ships parked on the ramp, navigation lights picked out against the early dawn colors of the sky.

"Which of those boats are ready to lift?" Retief demanded.

Shluh swiveled a choleric eye.

"All of them are shuttles; they have no range. They will not help you."

"To answer the question, Shluh, or to get another crack on the head."

"You are not like other Terrestrials! You are a mad dog!"

"We'll rough out a character sketch of me later. Are they all fueled up? You know the procedures here. Did those shuttles just get in, or is that the ready line?"

"Yes. All are fueled and ready for take-off."

"I hope you're right, Shluh. You and I are going to drive over and get in one; if it doesn't lift, I'll kill you and try the next. Let's go."

"You are mad! I have told you—these boats have not more than ten thousand ton-seconds capacity. They are useful only for satellite runs."

"Never mind the details. Let's try the first in line."

Shluh let in the clutch and the steam car clanked and heaved, rolled off toward the line of boats.

"Not the first in line," Shluh said suddenly. "The last is the more likely to be fueled. But—"

"Smart grasshopper," Retief

said. "Pull up to the entry port, hop out and go right up. I'll be right behind you."

"The gangway guard. The challenging of—"

"More details. Just give him a dirty look and say what's necessary. You know the technique."

THE car passed under the stern of the first boat, then the second. There was no alarm. It rounded the third and shuddered to a stop by the open port of the last vessel.

"Out," Retief said. "To make it snappy."

Shluh stepped from the car, hesitated as the guard came to attention, then hissed at him and mounted the steps. The guard looked wonderingly at Retief, mandibles slack.

"An outworlder!" he said. He unlimbered his scatter-gun. "To stop here, meat-faced one."

Shluh froze, turned.

"To snap to attention, littermate of drones!" Retief rasped in Groacian. The guard jumped, waved his eye stalks and came to attention.

"About face!" Retief hissed. "Hell out of here—to march!"

The guard tramped off across the ramp. Retief took the steps two at a time, slammed the port shut behind himself.

"I'm glad your boys have a little discipline, Shluh," Retief said. "What did you say to him?"

"I but—"

"Never mind. We're in. Get up to the control compartment."

"What do you know of Groacian naval vessels?"

"Plenty. This is a straight copy from the lifeboat you lads hijacked. I can run it. Get going."

Retief followed Shluh up the companionway into the cramped control room.

"Tie in, Shluh," Retief ordered.

"This is insane!" Shluh said. "We have only fuel enough for a one-way transit to the satellite. We cannot enter orbit, nor can we land again! To lift this boat is death—unless your destination is our moon."

"The moon is down, Shluh," Retief said. "And so are we. But not for long. Tie in."

"Release me," Shluh gasped. "I promise you immunity."

"If I have to tie you in myself, I might bend your head in the process."

Shluh crawled onto the couch, strapped in.

"Give it up," he said. "I will see that you are reinstated—with honor! I will guarantee a safe conduct."

"Countdown," Retief said. He threw in the autopilot.

"It is death!" Shluh screeched.

The gyros hummed; timers ticked; relays closed. Retief lay relaxed on the acceleration pad. Shluh breathed noisily, his mandibles clicking rapidly.

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"That I had fled in time," Shluh said in a hoarse whisper. "This is not a good death..."

"No death is a good death," Retief said. "Not for a while yet." The red light flashed on in the center of the panel, and abruptly sound filled the universe. The ship trembled, lifted.

Retief could hear Shluh's whimpering even through the roar of the drive.

"PERIHELION," Shluh said dully. "To begin now the long fall back."

"Not quite," Retief said. "I figure eighty-five seconds to go." He scanned the instruments, frowning.

"We will not reach the surface, of course," Shluh said in Terran. "The pips on the screen are missiles. We have a rendezvous in space, Retief. In your madness, may you be content."

"They're fifteen minutes behind us, Shluh. Your defenses are sluggish."

"Nevermore to burrow in the gray sands of Groac," Shluh said.

Retief's eyes were fixed on a dial face.

"Any time now," he said softly. Shluh conted his eye stalks.

"What do you seek?"

Retief stiffened.

"Look at the screen," he said. Shluh looked. A glowing point, off-center, moving rapidly across the grid...

"What—"

"Later!"

Shluh watched as Retief's eyes darted from one needle to another.

"How..."

"For your own neck's sake, Shluh," Retief said, "you'd better hope this works." He flipped the sending key.

"2396 TR-42 G, this is the Terrestrial Consul at Groac, aboard Groac 902, vectoring on you at an MP fix of 91/54/94. Can you read me? Over."

"What forlorn gesture is this?" Shluh whispered. "You cry in the night to emptiness!"

"Button your mandibles," Retief snapped, listening. There was a faint hum of stellar background noise. Retief repeated his call, waited.

"Maybe they hear but can't answer," he muttered. He flipped the key.

"2396, you've got twenty seconds to lock a tractor beam on me, or I'll be past you like a shot of rum past a sailor's bridgework..."

"To call into the void!" Shluh said. "To—"

"Look at the DV screen."

SHLUH twisted his head, looked. Against the background mist of stars, a shape loomed, dark and inert.

"It is...a ship!" Shluh said. "A monster ship!"

"That's her," Retief said. "Nine years and a few months out of New Terra on a routine mapping mission. The missing

cruiser—the IVS *Terrific*,"

"Impossible!" Shluh hissed. "The hulk swings in a deep cometary orbit."

"Right. And now it's making its close swing past Groac."

"You think to match orbits with the derelict? Without power? Our meeting will be a violent one, if that is your intent."

"We won't hit; we'll make our pass at about five thousand yards."

"To what end, Terrestrial? You have found your lost ship. Then what? Is this glimpse worth the death we die?"

"Maybe they're not dead," Retief said.

"Not dead?" Shluh lapsed into Groacian. "To have died in the burrow of one's youth. To have burst my throat sac ere I embarked with a mad alien to call up the dead."

"2396, make it snappy," Retief called. The speaker crackled heedlessly. The dark image on the screen drifted past, dwindling now.

"Nine years, and the mad one speaking as to friends," Shluh raved. "Nine years dead, and still to seek them."

"Another twenty seconds," Retief said softly, "and we're out of range. Look alive, boys."

"Was this your plan, Retief?" Shluh asked in Terran. "Did you flee Groac and risk all on this slender thread?"

"How long would I have

lasted in one of your Groaci prisons?"

"Long and long, my Retief," Shluh hissed, "under the blade of an artist."

Abruptly, the ship trembled, seemed to drag, rolling the two passengers in their couches. Shluh hissed as the restraining harness cut into him. The shuttle boat was pivoting heavily, u p e n d i n g. Crushing acceleration forces built. Shluh gasped and cried out shrilly.

"What...is...it?"

"It looks," Retief said, "like we've had a little bit of luck."

V

"O N our second pass," the gaunt-faced officer said, "they let fly with something. I don't know how it got past our screens. It socked home in the stern and put the main pipe off the air. I threw full power to the emergency shields, and broadcast our identification on a scatter that should have hit every receiver within a parsec. Nothing. Then the transmitter blew. I was a fool to send the boat down but I couldn't believe, somehow..."

"In a way it's lucky you did, Captain. That was my only lead."

"They tried to finish us after that. But with full power to the screens, nothing they had could get through. Then they called on us to surrender."

Retief nodded. "I take it you weren't tempted?"

"More than you know. It was a long swing out on our first circuit. Then, coming back in, we figured we'd hit. As a last resort I would have pulled back power from the screens and tried to adjust the orbit with the steering jets. But the bombardment was pretty heavy; I don't think we'd have made it. Then we swung past and headed out again. We've got a three year period. Don't think I didn't consider giving up."

"Why didn't you?"

"The information we have is important. We've got plenty of stores aboard. Enough for another ten years, if necessary. Sooner or later, I knew Search Command would find us."

Retief cleared his throat. "I'm glad you stuck with it, Captain. Even a backwater world like Groac can kill a lot of people when it runs amok."

"What I didn't know," the captain went on, "was that we're not in a stable orbit. We're going to graze atmosphere pretty deeply this pass, and in another sixty days we'd be back to stay. I guess the Groaci would be ready for us."

"No wonder they were sitting on this so tight," Retief said. "They were almost in the clear."

"And you're here now," the captain said. "Nine years, and we weren't forgotten. I knew we could count on—"

"It's over now, Captain," Retief said. "That's what counts."

"Home," the captain said. "After nine years..."

"I'D like to take a look at the films you mentioned," Retief said. "The ones showing the installations on the satellite."

The captain complied. Retief watched as the scene unrolled, showing the bleak surface of the tiny moon as the *Terrific* had seen it nine years before.

In harsh black and white, row on row of identical hulls cast long shadows across the pitted metallic surface of the satellite. Retief whistled.

"They had quite a little surprise in store. Your visit must have panicked them."

"They should be about ready to go, by now. Nine years..."

"Hold the picture," Retief said suddenly. "What's that ragged black line across the plain there?"

"I think it's a fissure. The crystalline structure—"

"I've got what may be an idea," Retief said. "I had a look at some classified files last night, at the foreign office. One was a progress report on a fissionable stockpile. It didn't make much sense at the time. Now I get the picture. Which is the 'north' end of that crevasse?"

"At the top of the picture."

"Unless I'm badly mistaken, that's the bomb dump. The

Groaci like to tuck things underground. I wonder what a direct hit with a fifty megaton missile would do to it?"

"If that's an ordnance storage dump," the captain said, "it's an experiment I'd like to try."

"Can you hit it?"

"I've got fifty heavy missiles aboard. If I fire them in direct sequence, it should saturate the defenses. Yes, I can hit it."

"The range isn't too great?"

"These are the de luxe models," the captain smiled balefully. "Video guidance. We could steer them into a bar and park 'em on a stool."

"What do you say we try it?"

"I've been wanting a solid target for a long time," the captain said.

RETIEF waved a hand toward the screen.

"That expanding dust cloud used to be the satellite of Groac, Shluh," he said. "Looks like something happened to it."

The police chief stared at the picture.

"Too bad," Retief said. "But then it wasn't of any importance, was it, Shluh?"

Shluh muttered incomprehensibly.

"Just a bare hunk of iron, Shluh. That's what the foreign office told me when I asked for information."

"I wish you'd keep your prisoner out of sight," the

captain said. "I have a hard time keeping my hands off him."

"Shluh wants to help, Captain. He's been a bad boy and I have a feeling he'd like to cooperate with us now. Especially in view of the imminent arrival of a Terrestrial ship, and the dust cloud out there."

"What do you mean?"

"Captain, you can ride it out for another week, contact the ship when it arrives, get a tow in and your troubles are over. When your films are shown in the proper quarter, a task force will come out here. They'll reduce Groac to a sub-technical cultural level, and set up a monitor system to insure she doesn't get any more expansionist ideas. Not that she can do much now, with her handy iron mine in the sky gone."

"That's right; and—"

"On the other hand," Retief said, "there's what I might call the diplomatic approach..."

He explained at length. The captain looked at him thoughtfully.

"I'll go along," he said. "What about this fellow?"

Retief turned to Shluh. The Groacian shuddered, eye stalks retracted.

"I will do it," he said faintly.

"Right," Retief said. "Captain, if you'll have your men bring in the transmitter from the shuttle, I'll place a call to

THE MADMAN FROM EARTH

a fellow named Fith at the foreign office." He turned to Shluh. "And when I get him, Shluh, you'll do everything exactly as I've told you—or have terrestrial monitors dictating in Groac City."

"**Q**UITE candidly, Retief," Counsellor Pardy said, "I'm rather nonplussed. Mr. Fith of the foreign office seemed almost painfully lavish in your praise. He seems most eager to please you. In the light of some of the evidence I've turned up of highly irregular behavior on your part, it's difficult to understand."

"Fith and I have been through a lot together," Retief said. "We understand each other."

"You have no cause for complacency, Retief," Pardy said. "Miss Meuhl was quite justified in reporting your case. Of course, had she known that you were assisting Mr. Fith in his marvelous work, she would have modified her report somewhat, no doubt. You should have confided in her."

"Fith wanted to keep it secret, in case it didn't work out," Retief said. "You know how it is."

"Of course. And as soon as Miss Meuhl recovers from her nervous breakdown, there'll be a nice promotion awaiting her. The girl more than deserves it for her years of unswerving devotion to Corps policy."

"Unswerving," Retief said.

"I'll sure go along with that."
"As well you may, Retief. You've not acquitted yourself well in this assignment. I'm arranging for a transfer. You've alienated too many of the local people..."

"But as you said, Fith speaks highly of me..."

"Oh, true. It's the cultural intelligentsia I'm referring to. Miss Meuhl's records show that you deliberately affronted a number of influential groups by boycotting—"

"Tone deaf," Retief said. "To me a Groacian blowing a nose-whistle sounds like a Groacian blowing a nose-whistle."

"You have to come to terms with local aesthetic values," Pardy explained. "Learn to know the people as they really are. It's apparent from some of the remarks Miss Meuhl quoted in her report that you held the Groaci in rather low esteem. But how wrong you were! All the while, they were working unceasingly to rescue those brave lads marooned aboard our cruiser. They pressed on even after we ourselves had abandoned the search. And when they discov-

ered that it had been a collision with their satellite which disabled the craft, they made that magnificent gesture—unprecedented. One hundred thousand credits in gold to each crew member, as a token of Groacian sympathy."

"A handsome gesture," Retief murmured.

"I hope, Retief, that you've learned from this incident. In view of the helpful part you played in advising Mr. Fith in matters of procedure to assist in his search, I'm not recommending a reduction in grade. We'll overlook the affair, give you a clean slate. But in future, I'll be watching you closely."

"You can't win 'em all," Retief said.

"You'd better pack up. You'll be coming along with us in the morning." Pardy shuffled his papers together.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that I can't file a more flattering report on you. I would have liked to recommend your promotion, along with Miss Meuhl's."

"That's okay," Retief said. "I have my memories." END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

WILLY LEY writes in February GALAXY

Learn about Earth's astonishing "dust moons" — long missed by astronomers, because they can only be seen by the naked eye! In the same issue, stories by Poul Anderson, Frederik Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth, Algis Budrys, Fritz Leiber and many others. February *Galaxy* still on sale — get your copy today!

★ SEVEN DAY ★ ★ TERROR ★

Things just vanished. It was simple. As a matter of fact, it was child's play!

BY R. A. LAFFERTY

"IS there anything you want to make disappear?" Clarence Willoughby asked his mother.

"A sink full of dishes is all I can think of. How will you do it?"

"I just built a disappearer. All you do is cut the other end out of a beer can. Then you take two pieces of red cardboard with peepholes in the middle and fit them in the ends. You look through the peepholes and blink. Whatever you look at will disappear."

"Oh."

"But I don't know if I can make them come back. We'd better try it on something else. Dishes cost money."

As always, Myra Willoughby had to admire the wisdom of her nine-year-old son. She would not have had such fore-

sight herself. He always did.

"You can try it on Blanche Manners' cat outside there. Nobody will care if it disappears except Blanche Manners."

"All right."

He put the disappearer to his eye and blinked. The cat disappeared from the sidewalk outside.

His mother was interested. "I wonder how it works. Do you know how it works?"

"Yes. You take a beer can with both ends cut out and put in two pieces of cardboard. Then you blink."

"Never mind. Take it outside and play with it. You hadn't better make anything disappear in here till I think about this."

But when he had gone his mother was oddly disturbed.

"I wonder if I have a pre-

cocious child. Why, there's lots of grown people who wouldn't know how to make a disappearer that would work. I wonder if Blanche Manners will miss her cat very much?"

Clarence went down to the Plugged Nickel, a pot house on the corner.

"Do you have anything you want to make disappear, Nokomis?"

"Only my paunch."

"If I make it disappear it'll leave a hole in you and you'll bleed to death."

"That's right, I would. Why don't you try it on the fire plug outside?"

THIS in a way was one of the happiest afternoons ever in the neighborhood. The children came from blocks around to play in the flooded streets and gutters, and if some of them drowned (and we don't say that they *did* drown) in the flood (and brother! it was a flood), why, you have to expect things like that. The fire engines (whoever heard of calling fire engines to put out a flood?) were apparatus-deep in the water. The policemen and ambulance men wandered around wet and bewildered.

"Resuscitator, resuscitator, anybody wanna resuscitator," chanted Clarissa Willoughby.

"Oh, shut up," said the ambulance attendants.

Nokomis, the bar man in the Plugged Nickel, called Clarence aside.

"I don't believe, just for the moment, I'd tell anyone what happened to that fire plug," he said.

"I won't tell if you won't tell," said Clarence.

Officer Comstock was suspicious. "There's only seven possible explanations. One of the seven Willoughby kids did it. I dunno how. It'd take a bulldozer to do it, and then there'd be something left of the plug. But however they did it, one of them did it."

Officer Comstock had a talent for getting near the truth of dark matters. This is why he was walking a beat out here in the boondocks instead of sitting in a chair downtown.

"Clarissa!" said Officer Comstock in a voice like thunder.

"Resuscitator, resuscitator, anybody wanna resuscitator?" chanted Clarissa.

"Do you know what happened to that fire plug?" asked officer C.

"I have an uncanny suspicion. As yet it is no more than that. When I am better informed I will advise you."

Clarissa was eight years old and much given to uncanny suspicions.

"Clementine, Harold, Corinne, Jimmy, Cyril," he asked the five younger Willoughby children. "Do you know what happened to that fire plug?"

"There was a man around yesterday. I bet he took it," said Clementine.

"I don't even remember a fire plug there. I think you're making a lot of fuss about nothing," said Harold.

"City hall's going to hear about this," said Corinne.

"Pretty dommed sure," said Jimmy, "but I won't tell."

"Cyril!" cried Officer Comstock in a terrible voice. Not a terrifying voice, a terrible voice. He felt terrible now.

"Great green bananas," said Cyril, "I'm only three years old. I don't see how it's even my responsibility."

"Clarence," said Officer Comstock.

Clarence gulped.

"Do you know where that fire plug went?"

Clarence brightened. "No, sir. I don't know where it went."

A bunch of smart alics from the water department came out and shut off the water for a few blocks around and put some kind of cap on in place of the fire plug. "This sure is going to be a funny-sounding report," said one of them.

Officer Comstock walked away discouraged. "Don't bother me, Miss Manners," he said. "I don't know where to look for your cat. I don't even know where to look for a fire plug."

"I have an idea," said Clarissa, "that when you find the cat you will find the fire plug the same place. As yet it is only an idea."

Ozzie Murphy wore a little

hat on top of his head. Clarence pointed his weapon and winked. The hat was no longer there, but a little trickle of blood was running down the pate.

"I don't believe I'd play with that any more," said Nokomis.

"Who's playing?" said Clarence. "This is for real."

THIS was the beginning of the seven-day terror in the heretofore obscure neighborhood. Trees disappeared from the parkings; lamp posts were as though they had never been; Wally Waldorf drove home, got out, slammed the door of his car, and there was no car. As George Mullendorf came up the walk to his house his dog Pete ran to meet him and took a flying leap to his arms. The dog left the sidewalk but something happened; the dog was gone and only a bark lingered for a moment in the puzzled air.

But the worst were the fire-plugs. The second plug was installed the morning after the disappearance of the first. In eight minutes it was gone and the flood waters returned. Another one was in by twelve o'clock. Within three minutes it had vanished. The next morning fire plug number four was installed.

The water commissioner was there, the city engineer was there, the chief of police was there with a riot squad, the president of the parent-

teachers association was there, the president of the University was there, the mayor was there, three gentlemen of the F.B.I., a newsreel photographer, eminent scientists and a crowd of honest citizens.

"Let's see it disappear now," said the city engineer.

"Let's see it disappear now," said the police chief.

"Let's see it disa—it did, didn't it?" said one of the eminent scientists.

And it was gone and everybody was very wet.

"At least I have the picture sequence of the year," said the photographer. But his camera and apparatus disappeared from the midst of them.

"Shut off the water and cap it," said the commissioner. "And don't put in another plug yet. That was the last plug in the warehouse."

"This is too big for me," said the mayor. "I wonder that Tass doesn't have it yet."

"Tass has it," said a little round man. "I am Tass."

"If all of you gentlemen will come into the Plugged Nickel," said Nokomis, "and try one of our new Fire Hydrant Highballs you will all be happier. These are made of good corn whisky, brown sugar and hydrant water from this very gutter. You can be the first to drink them."

Business was phenomenal at the Plugged Nickel, for it was in front of its very doors that the fire plugs disappeared in floods of gushing water.

"I know a way we can get rich," said Clarissa several days later to her father, Tom Willoughby. "Everybody says they're going to sell their houses for nothing and move out of the neighborhood. Go get a lot of money and buy them all. Then you can sell them again and get rich."

"I wouldn't buy them for a dollar each. Three of them have disappeared already, and all the families but us have their furniture moved out in their front yards. There might be nothing but vacant lots in the morning."

"Good, then buy the vacant lots. And you can be ready when the houses come back."

"Come back? Are the houses going to come back? Do you know anything about this, young lady?"

"I have a suspicion verging on a certainty. As of now I can say no more."

THREE eminent scientists were gathered in an untidy suite that looked as though it belonged to a drunken sultan.

"This transcends the metaphysical. It impinges on the quantum continuum. In some ways it obsoletes Boff," said Dr. Velikof Vonk.

"The contingency on the intransigence is the most mystifying aspect," said Arpad Arkabaranan.

"Yes," said Willy McGilly. "Who would have thought that you could do it with a beer can and two pieces of

cardboard? When I was a boy I used an oatmeal box and red crayola."

"I do not always follow you," said Dr. Vonk. "I wish you would speak plainer."

So far no human had been injured or disappeared—except for a little blood on the pate of Ozzie Murphy, on the lobes of Conchita when her gaudy earrings disappeared from her very ears, a clipped finger or so when a house vanished as the front door knob was touched, a lost toe when a neighborhood boy kicked at a can and the can was not; probably not more than a pint of blood and three or four ounces of flesh all together.

Now, however, Mr. Buckle the grocery man disappeared before witnesses. This was serious.

Some mean-looking investigators from downtown came out to the Willoughbys. The meanest-looking one was the mayor. In happier days he had not been a mean man, but the terror had now reigned for seven days.

"There have been ugly rumors," said one of the mean investigators, "that link certain events to this household. Do any of you know anything about them?"

"I started most of them," said Clarissa. "But I didn't consider them ugly. Cryptic, rather. But if you want to get to the bottom of this just ask me a question."

SEVEN-DAY TERROR

"Did you make those things disappear?" asked the investigator.

"That isn't the question," said Clarissa.

"Do you know where they have gone?" asked the investigator.

"That isn't the question either," said Clarissa.

"Can you make them come back?"

"Why, of course I can. Anybody can. Can't you?"

"I cannot. If you can, please do so at once."

"I need some stuff. Get me a gold watch and a hammer. Then go down to the drug store and get me this list of chemicals. And I need a yard of black velvet and a pound of rock candy."

"Shall we?" asked one of the investigators.

"Yes," said the mayor, "it's our only hope. Get her anything she wants."

And it was all assembled.

"**W**HY does she get all the attention?" asked Clarence. "I was the one that made all the things disappear. How does she know how to get them back?"

"I knew it!" cried Clarissa with hate. "I knew he was the one that did it. He read in my diary how to make a disappearer. If I was his mother I'd whip him for reading his little sister's diary. That's what happens when things like that fall into irresponsible hands."

She poised the hammer over

the gold watch of the mayor on the floor.

"I have to wait a few seconds. This can't be hurried. It'll be only a little while."

The second hand swept around to the point that was preordained for it before the world began. Clarissa suddenly brought down the hammer with all her force on the beautiful gold watch.

"That's all," she said. "Your troubles are over. See, there is Blanche Manners' cat on the sidewalk just where she was seven days ago."

And the cat was back.

"Now let's go down to the Plugged Nickel and watch the fire plug come back."

They had only a few minutes to wait. It came from nowhere and clanged into the street like a sign and a witness.

"Now I predict," said Clarissa, "that every single object will return exactly seven days from the time of its disappearance."

The seven-day terror had ended. The objects began to reappear.

"How," asked the mayor, "did you know they would come back in seven days?"

"Because it was a seven-day disappearer that Clarence made. I also know how to make a nine-day, a thirteen-day, a twenty-seven-day, and an eleven-year disappearer. I was going to make a thirteen-day one, but for that you have to color the ends with the blood from a little boy's heart, and Cyril cried every time I tried to make a good cut."

"You really know how to make all of these?"

"Yes. But I shudder if the knowledge should ever come into unauthorized hands."

"I shudder too, Clarissa. But tell me, why did you want the chemicals?"

"For my chemistry set."

"And the black velvet?"

"For doll dresses."

"And the pound of rock candy?"

"How did you ever get to be mayor of this town if you have to ask questions like that? What do you think I wanted the rock candy for?"

"One last question," said the mayor. "Why did you smash my gold watch with the hammer?"

"Oh," said Clarissa, "that was for dramatic effect."

END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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Dear Editor,

If is certainly getting better. The thing that most needed changing was *If*'s cover. It had a poor design, and was often poorly drawn. I'm sure *If* has increased in popularity since the November and January issues hit the newsstands.

Next, the letter col. Despite all the griping, four or five pages is the perfect size for it. Congratulations.

As far as the other features go, I have a rather unusual plan. Take Sturgeon out of the special feature department and get him to write your book review column. You will recall that he wrote book reviews for the late, lamented *Venture*, and did admirably.

You should take out *Science Briefs* entirely. It just doesn't fit the mag. However, make your editorials regular, please.

The most important part of the mag, of course, is the stories. *At the End of the Orbit*, by Arthur C. Clarke, was one of the best stories I've read in *If*. The stories in *If*, which have always been interesting and amusing, are beginning to show some seriousness.

Science fiction is once again on the upswing...

Paul Williams
Belmont, Mass.

* * *

Dear Incumbent:

Ah, the contents page:
"All Stories New and Com-

plete"... "NOVEL— First of Two Parts." Do I note a discrepancy here? I suspect I do. I hate to say it in public, but this is the first Doc Smith yarn I've had a chance to read ...it's good, though. Somebody at a recent ESFA meeting said that it's mainly Doc's story, as he rewrote it almost completely when E. E. Evans passed on. Somebody also said that it's been cut 10,000 words, but I don't want to believe *that*.

Clarke's story is another in his "Isn't everything ironic?" philosophy. Dull and wasted. Ken Bulmer's novelette is the second-best thing in this, but his one in the Septish was better than this later adventure of Retief. In his "Keith Laumer" guise, Bulmer seems to be writing good action/adventure stories...

Lawrence Crilly
Elizabeth, N.J.

* Re contents page: Oops. Re Smith-Evans serial: It was cut some—had to be, to fit in two parts—but we did it with loving care and trust nothing vital was lost. Re Bulmer/Laumer: Wha? How do these rumors get started, anyway?—Ed.

* * *

Dear Editor,

First things first: the cover. The covers on *If* have been failing to satisfy, lately. They're not *bad* covers, they just don't arouse my interest.

Perhaps the best word for them is "trite." They are stale, stock situations, hardly suited to a sf magazine. What is wanted are covers in which something intriguing is happening, but you have to read the magazine to find out *what*. Covers that do not relate to the contents I consign to the lower regions.

The stories are for the most part good to adequate, very seldom falling into the poor class, which is, of course, what keeps me reading *If*. I do think an occasional *top* author with a really good story would liven things up a bit. Among the better ones you have been using is Keith Laumer. Quite enjoyed his last.

Pat Scott

Anacortes, Wash.

* Top author? How about Anderson's really fine job this issue? Covers and interior art are being worked on—as you can see in this issue.—Ed.

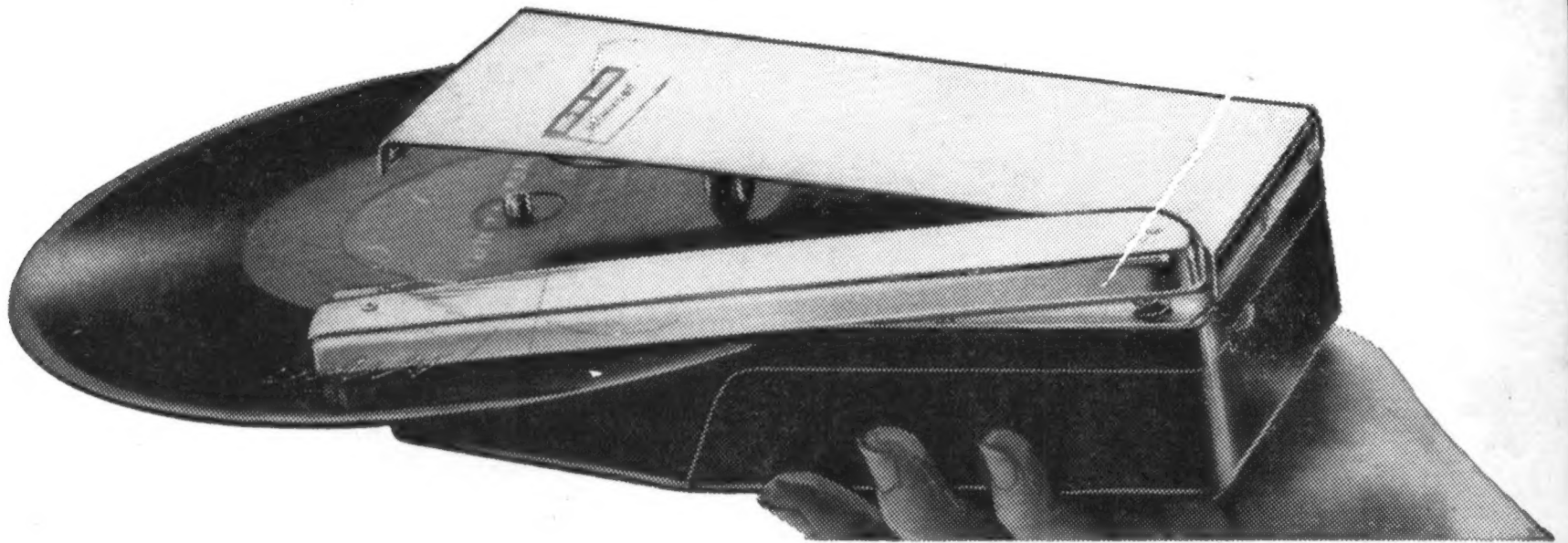
* * *

That does it for another month. Thanks to all who have written letters—those printed above, and those which aren't. (And we'd print a lot more if you'd write shorter notes!)

We do read—and when possible act on—all letters. For example, the one feature in *If* that had not a single defender was our unlamented cartoon page. As you see, it's gone.

—The Editor
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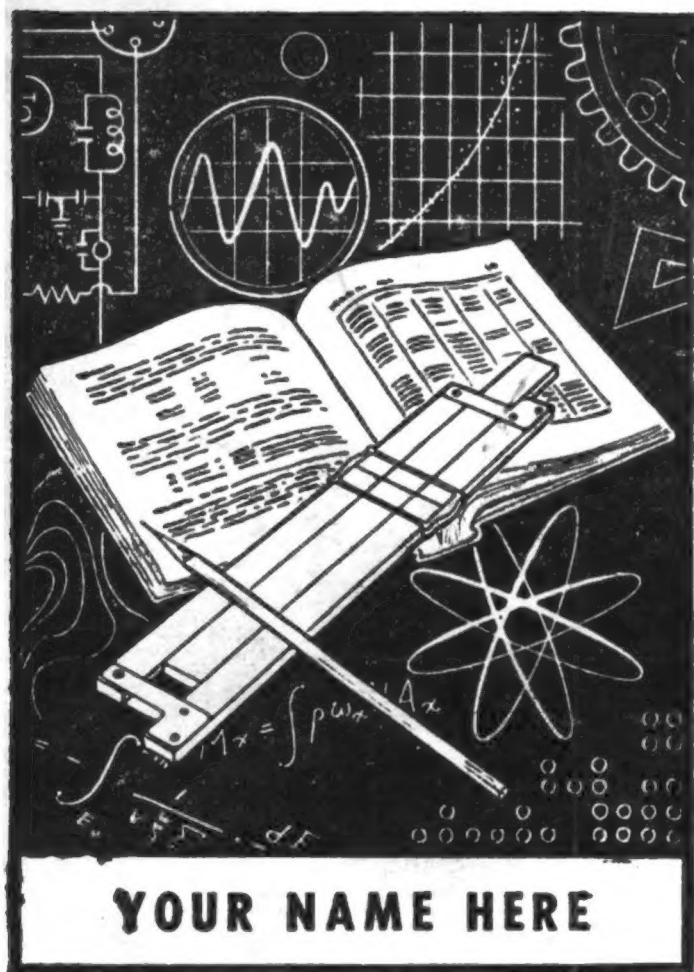
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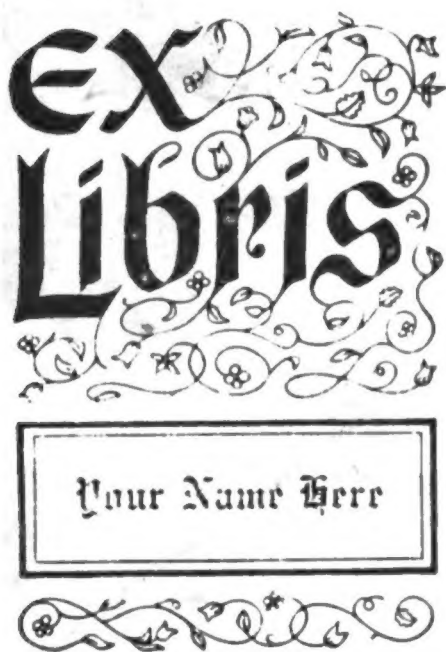
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